

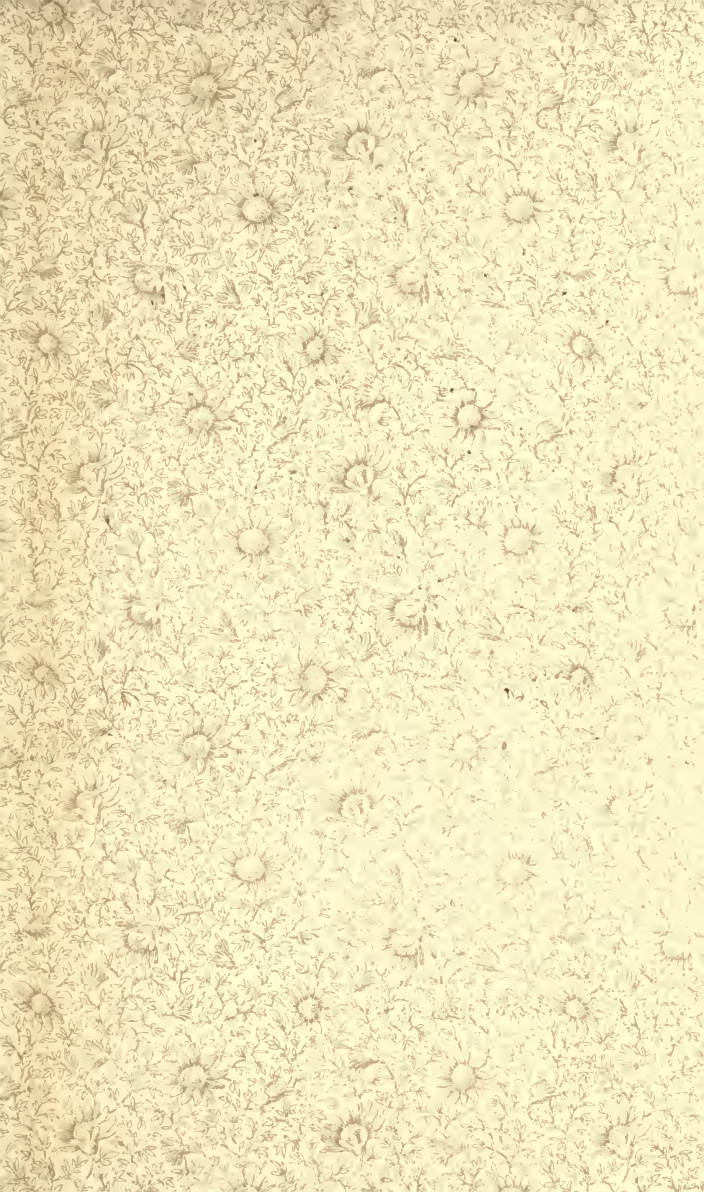
THE FORGIVENESS OF SINS

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The
Forgiveness of Sins

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The Forgiveness of Sins

Seven Sermons

By

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Preface.

THE following Sermons on *The Forgiveness of Sins* were preached in the Parish Church of St. Austell during Lent, 1894. They are now published in the hope of extending their usefulness. I have even ventured to think that some of the Clergy might consider them not unworthy of being reproduced *en bloc* to their congregations. If they have any merit, I think it will be found to lie mainly in the sharp distinction which I have drawn between Forgiveness and the *conveyance* and *assurance* of Forgiveness—things which, it has seemed to me, are often confounded.

As there are *seven* sermons, and only *six* Sundays in Lent, I may be allowed to suggest to anyone who proposes to read them in

Church, that the first might be used on *Quinquagesima* Sunday, or on Ash-Wednesday, as a kind of introduction to the course, or the last might be reserved for some Sunday after Easter.

I should like to add that, as I had a somewhat different congregation each week, I thought it well to repeat from time to time the cardinal ideas which I wished to enforce. And, as other congregations change, no less than mine, I have retained these repetitions in the revision.

*Vicarage, St. Austell,
Epiphany, 1896.*

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SERMON I.

The Preaching of Sin and its Pardon.

ACTS XIII. 38.

"Be it known unto you therefore, men and brethren, that through this man is preached unto you the forgiveness of sins."

THE Forgiveness of Sins, the subject on which I am to speak to you during this present Lent, is one which it can never be either unnecessary or inappropriate to consider at *any* time of the Christian year, and before *any* congregation assembled in the Church. It cannot be inappropriate, not merely because of its paramount importance; not merely because we all have and always have sins which need forgiveness; not merely because, unless and until they are

forgiven, all our worship is vain and all our work unprofitable,¹ but because this is a subject which, whether it is discussed in the *pulpit* or not, is persistently pressed upon our attention in the *prayers*; because sin and the forgiveness of sins are the very first things of which we hear both at Mattins and Evensong. If the minister of Christ does not *preach* about these things, still he must always *speak*, and the congregation must always *hear* about them. There is not a day in the year when the Church passes them by. Not merely do we publicly profess our belief in "the Forgiveness of Sins" in the Creed; not merely do we ask for forgiveness every time we say the Lord's Prayer or the Lesser Litany, but we find ourselves confronted with these questions at the beginning of each Service. The opening *Sentences* which we hear so often, and hear, if not with indifference, at least without realizing their import, are recited to remind us of our sins; of our sins and of the conditions on which they will be forgiven. The *Exhortation*, again, starts with the statement that "the

¹ Compare Article XIII.

Scripture moveth us . . . to acknowledge and confess our . . . sins and wickedness," and this "to the end that we may obtain forgiveness of the same." The *General Confession*, still speaking of sin, engages us to an open acknowledgment of our sins, both of omission and of commission, and puts a cry for their forgiveness into our lips, whilst the *Absolution* brings us a message of forgiveness; it proclaims a present pardon to all who "truly repent, and unfeignedly believe" God's Holy Gospel. It is abundantly clear, therefore, that no man can join in our daily offices, not even Bishop or Archbishop, without proclaiming himself a sinner, without pleading for forgiveness—and this all the year round, in Advent as well as in Lent, at our greatest festivals as on ordinary days. In the Jewish sacrifices there was "a remembrance again made of sins every *year*";¹ in our Christian services there is "a remembrance again made of sins every" *day*.

And what is true of the Order for Morning and Evening Prayer is also true of the *Divine Service*, of the Order of Holy Communion. We

¹ Heb. x. 3.

can no more escape the subject of Sin in the latter case than in the former. The *Invitation* is addressed to those, and those only, who “do truly and earnestly repent them of their sins”: the *Confession* requires both priest and people to “acknowledge and bewail their manifold sins and wickedness,” and, like the General Confession, it puts a prayer for the forgiveness of these sins into their mouths; the *Absolution*, the *Comfortable Words*, the *Prayer of Humble Access*, the very *Prayer of Consecration*, all speak of sins and the pardon of sins. There is an impression abroad, I believe, that “Communicants set up for being better than other people,” but the service flatly contradicts this outrageous idea; it insists all the way through on the many sins of those who are about to communicate, or have communicated. The only difference it recognizes between them and other worshippers is this—that it requires from them additional and ampler confession of sins, and more earnest and importunate prayers for forgiveness. We can no more get away from the subject of sin at our Celebrations of Holy Communion than at other times; on the

contrary, we hear more about it then than ever.

And here let me turn aside for a moment to observe that, in putting these confessions and prayers into the lips of her children, and in thus keeping the thought of SIN for ever before their eyes, the Church only prays and worships as her Holy Lord has taught her to do. It can hardly be said that she gives greater prominence to the subject than HE did, for He inserted a petition for the forgiveness of sin into the Prayer which He prescribed to His disciples. That Prayer is remarkable for its brevity, but it comprehends a cry for pardon; of its seven petitions, one speaks of our "trespasses" against God and man. And it is not in the Lord's Prayer alone that our Saviour has spoken of sin, and taught us to cry to God for its forgiveness. The Publican's prayer contains but one petition, and that is for the remission of sins. And these prayers of our Redeemer are in strict accord, it need hardly be said, with all the spirit and aims of His religion, a religion which was *introduced* to the world by the preaching of a "baptism of repentance for the

remission of sins,"¹ a religion which is to be *propagated* in the world by preaching "repentance and *remission of sins*," in Christ's Name among all the nations.² If the Church puts the subject of Sin in the forefront of her services, it is only because the Saviour, and the Scriptures which testify of the Saviour, do the same.

It is therefore clear that, since our services always speak of sin, and are exclusively framed for the use of sinners, it cannot be *inappropriate* for our sermons to treat of the same topic. But I must also ask you to observe that it cannot be *unnecessary* for them so to do. I have showed that they *may* discourse of sin at any time; I now add that they *must*, at least occasionally, do so, and that, whenever they do so, no man can say that such teaching is needless. For it is to be remembered, that as every congregation consists exclusively of sinners—we can never divide *our* congregations, as I believe the Puritans used to do, and as I understand some preachers do still, into "saints and sinners": Churchmen are always required to proclaim themselves "sinners," and nothing

¹ S. Mark i. 4.

² S. Luke xxiv. 47.

else—so in every congregation, there will be some oppressed with the consciousness of sin, and yearning to be freed from its burden. We *must*, therefore, speak of sin, because we have to tell men how they are to be *saved* from their sins. But not only so, in every congregation there will be some, who, though they profess and call themselves “sinners,” do not realize the meaning of the word; some, in fact, who have no real conviction of sin, no desire for pardon, no clear perceptions of the way of forgiveness. And their condition is far more pitiable, because much more dangerous than that of those who are conscious of sin, and crushed beneath its load. These latter, at least, know that they are sick, and that they need a physician,¹ whereas, the former *are* sick, but fancy that they are whole. For their sake, therefore, in order that their eyes may be opened; in order that they may be brought to penitence, and so brought to pardon, it is necessary that the pulpit should, from time to time, re-echo Christ’s and the Church’s doctrine of sin. And, whensoever the pulpit *does* re-echo

¹ S. Luke v. 31.

that doctrine, no Churchman can justly maintain that such teaching is superfluous, for no one can condemn the doctrine of sin in the *pulpit*—provided, of course, that it is CHRIST'S doctrine of sin that is preached there—without, at the same time, condemning it in the *services*.

But whether we are agreed or not, that to speak of sin can *never* be inopportune or unnecessary in the Church, we shall, I think, be agreed that there can be no more appropriate subject for the season of Lent. For what is the very purpose of Lent; why was this season instituted? What is its character and keynote? To these questions only one answer can be given. Lent is set apart *because of sin*; set apart for the contemplation of our own sins, for self-examination, that we may realize them; for self-humiliation, that we may renounce them. The object of all the Lenten discipline, of all the Lenten services, is to produce penitence—penitence for sin. I spoke just now of the “keynote” of this holy season. Would you know what that is? You have only to turn to the Lenten collect, the collect for Ash-Wednesday, which is to be said in the Church every

day of the forty, and you will see in a moment that *the* subject of Lent is sin—sin, penitence for sin, and the pardon of sin. It is addressed to One Who doth “*forgive the sins* of all them that are *penitent*”; it asks of Him “perfect *remission and forgiveness*.” Can any one, in the face of these words, words which we are taught to say day by day, as long as Lent lasts, still doubt what Lent exists for? But if there should be any such person here, then let me refer him to the special service—the Communion service—provided for the first day of Lent. The drift and design of that service is distinctly stated in the opening preface, “To the intent that being admonished of the great indignation of God against *sinner*s, ye may the rather be moved to earnest and true repentance”; and how thoroughly the rest of the service keeps these aims in view, those of you who are familiar with it know very well. Where else will you find such a solemn charge on the subject of sin, such an effort to bring our sins home to us, such pathetic confessions of sins, such importunate prayers for forgiveness? And the Gospels and Epistles for this season—

yes, and the Proper Lessons too—all have the same idea in view; all treat of sin, or temptation to sin, or the propitiation for sin. I repeat, therefore, that whether the subject of sin is appropriate for consideration at all times or not, it is certainly pre-eminently suitable for consideration during the annual Missiontide of the Church (when she makes a *special* effort to bring her children to penitence), the season of Lent.

But you will perhaps wonder why I should spend so much time in justifying the choice which I have made of this subject. I have thought it necessary to say thus much because I cannot but know, that to the generality of minds at least, such a topic must necessarily be unpopular, if not actually painful. It can never be popular, because it treats, so to speak, of *disease*; because it tells of our demerits and misdoings; because it humbles us and makes us unhappy. To a serious mind instructions on sin cannot be otherwise than distressing, just as the study of disease, or rather, I should say, the discussion of the diseases under which they are themselves labouring must be terrifying, especially to men who fancied themselves

in perfect health. I have therefore thought it well to remind you that, in treating, as I have to do, of the diseases of the soul, I am only echoing the voice of the Church—yes, and the voice of the Church's Head. And I may also remind you at the same time, that I only speak of these diseases because I am able to tell of the remedy for them. My subject is not *sin*, so much as “the *forgiveness* of sins.” It would be altogether useless and profitless for us to harass you with any doctrine of sin, if we were not also prepared at the same time to exhibit its cure; to speak of the provision made by Almighty God for its full and free forgiveness. It is true that the doctrine of sin must break us down, but there is another doctrine—the doctrine of grace—which builds us up. We only bid you mourn in order that you may be comforted—because you *must* mourn before you *can* be comforted.¹

And this brings me to the course, the method which I propose to follow in dealing with this subject. In my next sermon, I must tell you—what I would spare you if I could; what I would fain pass over if I dared—that all have

¹ S. Matt. v. 4.

sinned, and therefore that *you* have sinned. I shall do what in me lies to bring your sins home to you ; I shall speak of what sin is, and suggest how we may have committed it. If I can, though only in part, “bring your sins to your remembrance,”¹ I shall feel that one portion of my task has been fulfilled. In the third address I shall ask what, in view of our “manifold sins and wickedness,” is to be done. We shall see that sin carries with it the idea of punishment, of wrath and retribution, and we shall consider what we can do or must do to escape it. We shall ask, among other questions, whether we can undo it, or compound for it, or expiate it. This will bring us to the subject of forgiveness, when I shall tell you of God’s provision for the pardon of the penitent ; of the conditions *on* which and the grace *by* which we may hope to receive the remission of our sins. I shall then turn to a different branch of the subject, namely, the *assurance* of our forgiveness, for I shall hope to show that God’s forgiveness and our *realization* of His forgiveness are two entirely different things. This

¹ 1 Kings xvii. 18.

will require me to speak of the two Sacraments and of the message of Absolution. It would be strange indeed, if the forgiveness of sins could be discussed in the Church without any reference to that "*Absolution or Remission of sins*," which is so prominent a feature in our services, and that "one Baptism for the remission of sins" which is so essential an Article of our Creed. The Absolution accordingly will be the subject of my fourth sermon, the Sacrament of Baptism of the fifth, and the Holy Communion of the sixth. I trust by this arrangement, not indeed to bring the "forgiveness of sins" before you in *all* its many aspects and relations, but to leave nothing out which it is necessary for your comfort and salvation that you should know. I venture to hope that these discourses will at least guard you against some popular errors, and guide you to a sober and scriptural faith, and that none of you after hearing them, will remain in any doubt as to what God does and requires for our forgiveness. If you are at all uncertain at the present moment as to what you "ought to know and believe for your soul's health" about the remission of sins, I trust that you will remain

so no longer, but will be able to say with a peace and a joy perhaps unknown to you before, "I believe in the forgiveness of sins."

But before I proceed further on this course of instructions, I must not fail to remind you that for the right understanding of this subject, something more is needed than the study of the Bible or the expositions of the pulpit. It is quite true that the priest of God is to preach "repentance and remission of sins"; true that as long as the world lasts he must echo the ancient message, "Be it known unto you, men and brethren, that through this man is preached unto you the forgiveness of sins"¹; but it is equally true that such preaching will fail of its object unless it is made effective and brought home to the heart by the supernatural power of God the Holy Ghost. I will not only ask you to consider that this is the dispensation of the Holy Spirit; that the "other Comforter," "the Spirit of truth," which our Lord promised to His Church to guide it into all truth, has come to take our Saviour's place and to carry on His work,² but I will ask you to remember

¹ Acts xiii. 38.

² S. John xiv. 26; xv. 26; xvi. 13.

that the subject of sin is part of His special province. You will no doubt recollect what our Lord Himself said of the Spirit's work, when the promise of the Comforter was made, "He shall convict the world of *sin*."¹ And so we find that on the day of Pentecost, when the Holy Ghost was given, one of the very first results was this, that "many were pricked to the heart."² Yes, it is the prerogative of God the Holy Ghost alike to convince of sin, and to comfort the penitent. It is for this reason, no doubt, that the forgiveness of sins is mentioned in the Creed soon after the mention of the Holy Ghost; that it is classed among the works of the Holy Ghost. And so we are continuously reminded that here we have to do with a superhuman power; that the Spirit of God alone can open the blind eyes and shew us ourselves and make us to know and realize our sins. I will therefore beg you, as you hear these addresses week by week, and in your daily prayers, to ask for the gift of the Holy Ghost, that you may both know your sins and learn the way to be saved from them.

¹ S. John xvi. 8.² Acts ii. 38.



SERMON II.

The Knowledge of Sin.

S. LUKE V. 8.

"I am a sinful man, O Lord."

FOR those who believe, as you do, that the Bible is true, and who see in its statements a revelation of the mind and will of God, no long or laboured proof will be necessary in order to show that *all* men have sinned.¹ Why, these very words are Bible words; it is the language of inspiration that "all have sinned, and come short of the glory of God"; that "both Jews and Gentiles are all under sin";² that "there is none righteous, no not one."³ It is certain that "the Scripture," as S. Paul reminds us, "hath concluded all

¹ Rom. iii. 23.

² v. 9.

³ Psalm xiv. 1; liii. 1-3; Rom. iii. 10-18.

under sin," and history does much the same. I may therefore spare myself the trouble of demonstrating what no instructed Christian denies, namely, that, according to God's Word, every man born into this world has the taint of sin and the tendency to it, and that every man who has lived and laboured in this world has committed many actual sins and transgressions. If this be denied—and it *has* been denied, both in ancient and modern times—it can only be done in the teeth of God's Holy Word.¹

But I must remind you who hear me, the children of the Church, that *you* are committed to a belief in the depravity of man in a way which others outside the Church's pale are not. For this doctrine is so interwoven into our various standards and services—Mattins, Litany, Baptism, Catechism, Confirmation, and the rest—that no Churchman can by any possibility get away from it. If others are free to say that they have no sin, *you* at least are not. The moment you said anything of the kind you would find yourself at issue with the plain

¹ "The Christian Gospel has absolutely no meaning or power apart from the assumption that men have sinned." (Dale, p. 216.)

teaching of the Church ; the moment you did this you would find yourself unable to take your part in the services. The Churchman, consequently, is under a *double* compulsion, that of the Scripture, and that of the Prayer Book (which, indeed, is but the echo of Holy Scripture) to “acknowledge and confess his manifold sins and wickedness.” If we have no sins we may as well burn our Bibles and Prayer Books, for we certainly cannot use them.

But it is needless to say that, between recognizing as an abstract truth that “*all* have sinned,” and that *we ourselves* are sinners, are verily guilty before God of many and various breaches of His law, there is a very wide difference. And not only so, but there is a very wide difference between knowing and allowing that we ourselves have sinned—sinned by word and thought and deed—and in any degree realizing the number and the enormity of our transgressions. A man may be very well aware that he has “sinned and done wickedly”—the prisoners in our gaols must be aware of *that*, if they ever reflect on their conduct—and yet may have no real conviction of sin, no sense of the

guilt which he has incurred, and the danger to which he is exposed. It must now, therefore, be my aim, with the help of God's Holy Spirit, to bring your sins to mind, to help you to *feel* them, and the sinfulness of them. A great statesman¹ has said that there seems to be much less *sense of sin* in the land and in the Church than formerly, and a thoughtful writer² remarks, that "among the Christian people with whom he has lived the consciousness of guilt has not in very many cases been strongly developed." I am much afraid that this witness is true; indeed, I should be much surprised if it were otherwise. But if this is so, it is an additional reason for such a course of sermons as this, an additional incentive to the effort which I am now to make. Believing, as I do, that every man is in danger who does not know himself to be a sinner, and who does not earnestly seek the forgiveness of his sins, you will not wonder that I should strive to convict you of sin. I am well aware that that is a painful process, but there is no help for it; it is the first step towards salvation. "If we say

¹ Mr. Gladstone.

² Dr. R. W. Dale.

that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves ; but if we confess our sins, He is faithful and just to forgive us our sins, and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness."

But before I enter on this task, there are two ideas more or less prevalent at the present day, prevalent at least among those who do not bow to the authority of Scripture, which demand a brief notice.

And the first is, that whilst we men appear to be free agents, and able to do almost as we like, we are really nothing of the kind, but are under an invisible constraint, under a necessity which compels us to act exactly as we do. In other words, that we can only do what we were fated and ordained to do ; that all our life, and every detail of our conduct is predetermined and appointed and arranged by an unseen power or powers. This was the belief of the Marcionites, Manichees, and other early heretics, and this belief has its representatives at the present time—men, too, who cite statistics to support their view. Now, if this were so, if men are absolutely mere machines, insensibly but unceasingly fulfilling the will of another,

then there can obviously be no such thing as *sin*, for how can we be blamed for doing what we cannot help doing? But *is this so?* Well, I shall not debate this question. I shall not attempt to prove either that we *are* free agents (which indeed I could not prove), or (which would be easy enough), that Holy Scripture everywhere *regards* us as such,¹ and *that* because a shorter and simpler course is open to me. Let us allow, for the sake of argument, that we have *not* free will; that men act, however unconsciously, from necessity. Still, that does not prevent us from dealing with one another just as if we were free; indeed, we are compelled so to do. Here is a man who has committed a crime, say a theft, or a murder. I wonder what the judge and the jury would think, if he pleaded this law of necessity; if he excused himself on the ground that he was compelled, by fate, to act as he did. They would make short work of his philosophic speculations. They would say, "We are not going to discuss the question whether you are really a free agent

¹ "This freedom is assumed and implied in the whole substance of the Christian Gospel." (Dale, *Christian Doctrine*, p. 179.)

or not. One thing is certain, and that is quite enough for us,—that we must *deal with you* as such. For the sake of *society*, for the security of life and property, we must hold you accountable for what you have done. We should soon have a pretty state of things, if every thief or every cut-throat could shelter himself behind the plea that he had only done what he was fated to do. Free or not, we must hold you responsible for this crime. If you were not free when you did it, we are very sorry for you, but we must hang you all the same. Nor can you consistently object to our hanging you, if (as you tell us is the case) men are not free agents. For if you were fated to do this deed, then we were just as much fated to call it a crime, as our law does, and to punish you accordingly, as the law directs.” Yes, such would be and must be *our* answer, and will anyone tell us why the Eternal God may not take the same view of the same transactions? Why may not HE say to sinners, what we should say to felons, namely, that if they were under the necessity to sin, He is under a necessity to punish them for it; and that even if they were

not free agents, He must, for the sake of society, for the general good, requite them as if they were.

And a similar answer may be made to those who hold the doctrine of heredity or *atavism*, as it is called ; who contend that men are not to be blamed or punished for what they do, because sin is a sort of disease—their characters and dispositions are inherited from their forefathers. Now, it is quite true that we are very much what our ancestors have made us, but that does not excuse our misconduct in the eye of the law, nor is it held to palliate our crimes. It does not excuse us, because the law says that if we have a bad nature, from whatever source it comes to us, we must *overcome* that evil nature or we shall get into trouble, and experience says the same. A man, or a child, who has inherited a passionate or quarrelsome disposition is not excused on that account, but he suffers the consequences of his disposition. People say that if he has inherited it, that is a reason for guarding against it, but no excuse whatever for giving way to it. Indeed, I have known parents punish those faults which were

inherited more severely than other faults, in order to teach their children where their special danger lay. No, we *do* not and we cannot exonerate any man from blame because his faults, or vices, are inherited. We cannot do it, because "heredity does not destroy the moral consciousness,"¹ "it is not fate": a man is as free to correct these errors as to commit them. Nor can God do it either. He will take our parentage into account, will make large allowance for the tempers and tendencies we have brought into the world with us, but He will not acquit us of sin on the ground that we have inherited the evil and corrupt nature of those who went before us.

I have thought it well to deal briefly with these two fallacies, because, as you will have observed, they do away with sin altogether; they say there is no such thing. If these teachings are true, it is not when we "say that we have *no* sin," but when we say that we have *any* sin, that "we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us."

I do not believe, however, that this is *your*

¹ See Denney. *Studies in Theology*, pp. 88-92.

danger. You have no doubt whatever as to your being free agents,¹ and you are also well aware that *you* are to blame, and not your parents only. You are too conscious, moreover, of your own shortcomings and misdoings; you have too many painful recollections of evil words that you have said, or evil deeds that you have wrought, to say that the Book which brands you as a sinner is all a lie. No, your danger is not to *deny* your sin, but to make light of it, to minimize it, to make excuses for it. And my duty is to prevent your so doing, if I can.

And why is it that men such as you, Churchgoers, Communicants, treat their sins so lightly? It is principally because they do not realize what sin is. They think that it is much the same thing as crime, and being guilty of no crimes they are quite comfortable about their sins.

Now, I am very far from saying that our Church people have committed no "crimes." It is quite true that, with rare exceptions, they

¹ "No philosophical demonstration of the theory of Necessity has ever seriously shaken this conviction." (Dale, p. 180.)

have not violated the law of the land, but are there no crimes that do not fall under the sentence of our tribunals? The law does not account it a crime—to take one example—to beguile a woman of the pearl of her chastity, but a shameful crime it is in God's sight nevertheless. And we cannot flatter ourselves that all Church-goers are innocent of this great offence, or indeed of many more.

But what if you are not guilty either of this or of other crimes? Why, all that we can say is that it would be a shame if you were. With the training and teaching we have had, with our advantages, our environment, is it any credit that we have not committed these flagrant sins? So far from flattering ourselves because we have been preserved from deadly sin, we should rather remember that in *our* case such sin would have been doubly inexcusable and heinous.

Or, to put it in a different way, are not our peccadilloes, as we term them, our (so called) “little sins,” as criminal in the sight of God as the felonies and brutalities and adulteries of other men who have not enjoyed our advantages?

Have you ever reflected *why* other men are felons and you are not? Is it not because you have been taught and watched and sheltered as they were not? If you had been born and bred as they were, in an atmosphere of vice and crime, is it not probable that you would have been as abandoned as they, and if they had had *your* education, your nurture, might they not have been as virtuous or as respectable as you? A magistrate, one of the best men I have ever known, once said to me that he seldom sat on the bench and viewed the prisoner at the bar without reminding himself that if he had had that man's training, and that man had had his advantages, their positions would in all probability have been reversed—the prisoner would have been the magistrate, and the magistrate the prisoner.

You see, then, that if we are to estimate our sins aright, if we are to weigh them as they will be weighed hereafter, we must view them in the light of our *opportunities* and *environment*. Where much has been given, much will be required. Of *us* the Everlasting Judge may justly expect ten times as much as of many

others. The sin depends for its quality, its guilt, on the person who committed it, because for one man there may be much excuse, for another none. And what excuse can there be for *our* sins? We cannot plead ignorance; no one can say of us, "They know not what they do." We cannot pretend that we were never warned. We shall be reminded of our mother's prayers, perhaps of our father's example, of our teachers and pastors, of their many admonitions and entreaties, of the land in which we lived, of our open Bible, of our Baptism, our Confirmation, our Communion—all our Church privileges. Of us it may be said, "Wherefore thou art inexcusable, O man"; and on us the sentence of "many stripes" may be pronounced.

But in appraising our sinfulness in the sight of God, we must not only consider who and what *we* are, but also what *God* has been to us, the God against Whom we have sinned. For, of course, it is a much more shameful and wicked thing to insult or outrage a father or a benefactor, than a common person. Even the Jewish law recognizes this—"He that curseth his father or his mother, let him die the death."

But if so, what shall be said of our sins? They are so many outrages or affronts levelled at our most loving and gracious and glorious Father, against One Who in a thousand ways has been our benefactor. They are so many blows struck at our Saviour, at the One Who suffered shame and spitting, the agony and the obloquy, for us. Of us and our sins it is said, "They crucify the Son of God afresh and put Him to an open shame." Yes, we nail again to the cruel cross the gentle Sufferer Who died for our sins—Who "bare our sins in His own body on the tree." We affront and grieve the Holy Spirit, the ever-blessed Comforter. This is the most shameful and hideous feature of our sin—that it is done against the good God Who has been so gracious to us. Of course, it is committed against the God of infinite purity and righteousness; against One Who regards sin with unspeakable loathing; it is committed against the Creator of heaven and earth, against "the blessed and only Potentate, the King of kings, and Lord of lords." But that is not the worst. It is committed against our Father, Saviour, Comforter. *Your* sins, whatever they have

been, have been wrought against Him Who made you, Who has fed you, clothed you, kept you, redeemed you, adopted you, blessed you.

But I daresay you still feel no great compunction or alarm about your sins; they have been, as you think, so much less than many other people's that you are almost comfortable about them. Then I will ask you to weigh two or three further considerations. First, I will ask you to remember that "Whosoever shall keep the whole law, and offend only in one point, is guilty of all."¹ That is to say, he is guilty of disobedience, of violation of law, of defying God's will. He who breaks *one* commandment has not thereby broken all the commandments, but he has violated that law of which all these commandments are parts. Secondly, I must remind you that most of your sins are sins of *omission*. That is why we say, "We have left undone what we ought to have done," before we speak of what we have done. Much of our complacency about our sins arises from forgetting that the sins of Christians are largely negative sins—wasted time, misused

¹ James ii. 10.

talents, neglected opportunities, undischarged duties. The Bible speaks of sins as "debts." For how many days and years do you owe your Creator? You are His servant, a steward of the time and talents He has entrusted to you; have you not wasted your Lord's goods? You think you have few sins because you cannot recollect any crimes, and He says you owe ten thousand talents, because of ten thousand wasted days and hours. We owe God every moment of life, for every moment He keeps us alive. Think then of your omissions. And think, lastly, of what we read about God's judgment. "He will bring every work into judgment, with every secret thing." He will even "make manifest the counsels of the hearts." "There is nothing hid that shall not be revealed, nor secret that shall not be made known." "Every idle word that men speak, they shall give account thereof in the day of judgment." "By thy words thou shalt be justified, and by thy words thou shalt be condemned." You think that God is merciful, and you think rightly. But God is no less *just* than merciful. He is "of purer eyes than to behold iniquity,"

32 The Knowledge of Sin.

and He “will by no means clear the guilty.” If you will consider these things, dearly beloved, honestly and patiently and prayerfully, as men who must give an account, you will come, under the teaching of the Holy Ghost, to the heartfelt confession, “I am a sinful man, O Lord,” and to the earnest cry, “God be merciful to me, the sinner.”





SERMON III.

The Pardon of Sin.

PSALM XXXII. 5.

"I said, 'I will confess my sins unto the Lord,' and so Thou forgavest the wickedness of my sin."



WE were agreed, I believe, last Sunday, that there is not one of us without sin, and, indeed, without *many* sins. "There is none righteous, no, not one"—not the Lord Archbishop, not the impassioned mission preacher, not the incorruptible magistrate. We may, and we do, differ in many respects, but in this we are all alike, that "we have sinned and done wickedly"; that we have resisted God's will, violated His law, broken His commands. We saw that, even if we have not committed any *crimes*, if we are innocent of what the world calls "heinous sins," we are

still sinners, if only because of our omissions, because of the things we have left undone, the debts we owe to God for wasted hours and misused talents and slighted grace. We have not been and done what God intended us to be and to do ; we have set aside His will in favour of our own, and this is the essence of sin.¹ No, I did not speak to much purpose last Sunday—so far, at least, as *you* are concerned—if I did not wring from you the confession, “ I am a sinful man, O Lord.”

And the sad and shameful thing, as we saw, is, that all this sin, of whatsoever sort, has been committed against One Who is so good and patient, so infinitely kind and compassionate. I do not say that our sins have not injured *others* ; on the contrary, we often work harm, and we sometimes bring ruin to our neighbours by our misdoing ; still, the injury we do *them* is as nothing compared with the dishonour and wrong which we do to our Maker. Hence it was that David, although he had done an irreparable wrong to Bathsheba, and had actually

¹ See Denney, *Studies in Theology*, p. 92. Card. Newman describes wilfulness as “ the cardinal sin of the human heart.”

killed Uriah, cried, "I have sinned *against the Lord.*" Every sin against self, or against our fellow-man, is also a sin against the Most High, and therefore against the Infinite Love, against the Fount of all goodness and pity and power. It is this that makes sin so exceedingly sinful.

Now this—and more—which I urged upon you last Sunday, is what no man can realize without heartfelt sorrow. Whether *you* realized your sinfulness I cannot say—you certainly could not, and did not, without the operation of God's Holy Spirit—but this I can say, that if you did, it has filled you with profound sorrow. What else could it do to discover that you had lifted your hand against your Father, to find that you had wronged and wounded One so gracious and so true? Indeed, if you have now for the first time grasped the thought of your sinfulness, you will feel, for the time at least, as if nothing else in the world was worth sorrowing about—nothing by the side of your sins. Worldly trials, temporal losses, even bereavements, what are they compared with this burden? As someone has written—

"Weep not for broad lands lost,
Weep not for fair hopes crossed,
Weep not when friends grow cold,
Weep not when joys wax old;
Yet weep, weep all thou can,
Weep, weep, because thou art
A sin-defiled man."

But the discovery that we are, really and truly, "miserable sinners" in God's sight, that we are "verily guilty" before the Searcher of hearts, begets another emotion, as well as sorrow; it creates in us a godly fear, a deep anxiety and alarm. For we remember that the Being against Whom we have sinned is not only good and kind, but is just and holy and inflexible. He is "of purer eyes than to behold iniquity."¹ He hates sin—hates it with a hatred which we cannot comprehend. It is therefore inconceivable that He should take no account of it; in other words, that He should "clear the guilty." It would not only be weak, it would be wrong in Him so to do. If He were to make no distinction between the righteous and the wicked, if wrong-doing is to go unpunished, then who will trouble to do right if it suits him

¹ Hab. i. 13.

to do wrong? No, the Judge of all the earth *cannot* pass over sin; to do so would be to put a premium upon it; it would be an indirect encouragement to it. But if so, then he cannot pass by *our* sins, and the less so as He has said that He will not—said it in His revelation of Himself, again and again. You must be quite clear on this point, that gentle and merciful as Eternal God is—perhaps *because* He is merciful—sin excites His fierce anger, and sinners, such as we are, lie under His heavy displeasure. Hence we find everywhere throughout the Scripture, what our Prayer Book calls “sentences of God’s cursing against impenitent sinners.” No one who has read his Bible—which it seems to me comparatively few people do in these days—can doubt that “indignation and wrath, tribulation and anguish,” are denounced against “every soul of man that worketh evil”;¹ no one can be ignorant that “the wages of sin is death.” “The soul that sinneth, it shall die.” Well then may we tremble and fear before Him; well may we dread the judgment to come! For this is how the matter stands: We

¹ Rom. ii. 9.

have sinned, and the sentence of death, of everlasting destruction from the presence of the Lord,¹ is denounced against the sinner.

What, then, are we to do to avert this terrible doom, the loss not only of heaven, but of life, of our own selves? Can it be averted, and if so, what steps can we take? Can we offer any ransom? "What must we do to be *saved*"—yes, saved from the guilt and punishment of sin?

Well, one thing is clear and certain, namely, what we *cannot* do. We cannot undo our sins, cannot alter them, cannot obliterate them. Nothing can alter them. They have been committed, and not even Omnipotence can recall or efface them. The past is irrevocable; like Pilate, what we have written we have written, and what we have done we have done. But cannot we make some satisfaction, some reparation or payment for them? What if for the rest of our time we live blameless lives; what if we also "go mourning all our days"? Will not that be accepted as a compensation? How can it be? For if, from this day forth we

¹ 2 Thess. i. 9.

commit no fresh sin to the day of our death—which is much more than we can promise to do—still, that would be no expiation, no set-off against the sins which we *have* committed. Innocence in the future will not make up for guilt in the past. Nor would it be any atonement if, in addition to this, we gave up our lives to the service of God and man, if we consecrated every hour to works of charity and mercy. It would be no payment, simply because it would be no more than our duty. We owe *all* our lives, all our powers and faculties to the service of our Creator ; it is a poor thing, therefore, to say, “I will give the last half of my time as a satisfaction for wasting the first half.” God is entitled to the whole. When we have done all the things that are commanded us, we are to say, “We are unprofitable servants : we have done that which it was our duty to do.”¹

So that it is clear that no man can by any means redeem his soul, or give to God a ransom for it;² quite clear that we “must let that alone for ever.”

¹ S. Luke xvii. 10.

² Psalm xlix. 7.

But is there, then, no resource, no deliverance? Yes, there is one, and only one: the God against Whom we have sinned can *forgive*. He can take pity upon us, and, "moved with compassion," can freely forgive us our debts. *Payment* is out of the question, but *pardon*, free and unmerited pardon, we may possibly obtain. What if He, Who "might the advantage best have took," has "found out the remedy"? And this brings us to the very heart of my subject; we now approach the *forgiveness* of sins.

And here we are confronted with an objection which has been raised quite recently, and by one who perhaps knows more about it now, for he has passed to his account.¹ He tells us that it is something like cant to talk about forgiveness; that to crave it is to want that justice may not be done; it is to desire to creep out of the righteous consequences of our errors. Yes, we are told that to ask for forgiveness is pure selfishness, and to grant it is pure weakness. Let us see whether this is so.

But first I must point out to you that no

¹ Mr. Cotter Mo'ison.

man who has any belief in the Bible could take this ground. We cannot declaim against all forgiveness without denouncing the forgiveness of which the Scripture speaks so constantly. For, full as the Bible is of the doctrine of *sin*, and much as it has to say about the *penalty* of sin, it is equally full of a doctrine of pardon. It is therefore impossible to challenge the morality or justice of forgiveness without at the same time arraigning the counsels and promises of God. None of you, I feel sure, can have any doubt on this point. If this new view is correct, then the parable of the Prodigal Son, for example, is misleading, and the Lord's Prayer is mischievous.

But it is not needful for me to appeal to the Bible, or to shelter myself behind its authority, in order to overthrow this novel teaching. A shorter course is open to me: I appeal to yourselves. For if it is idle to expect that God can or will forgive man—can or will release him from any of the consequences of his sins, then it must be as absurd or as injurious for us to forgive one another. If our Heavenly Father may not forgive us *our* trespasses, then as little

may we forgive our children, however dear and penitent and heart-broken they may be. Plainly, if it be wrong in God to pardon, it cannot be right in us, who are made in the image of God. So that, if this new doctrine is true, you must never ask or hope for any clemency for your misdeeds—not even from your dearest friend—and you must never extend any pardon to others—not to the wife of your bosom, not to the child of your heart; it is weak, if not wicked so to do.

Aye, but human nature sternly refuses to listen to this cold and cruel philosophy; it rebels against it and tramples it under foot. Fallen as our nature is, it is not so hard and implacable as to deny forgiveness in any and every case; it absolutely declines so to do. You may preach as much as you like against it, but we shall go on forgiving all the same. Here is an illustration—an extreme case. Not so long ago there was, I believe, a picture in a London exhibition which attracted much attention, the picture of a ruined, broken-hearted girl, with shame and misery stamped on every feature, and it was entitled “Betrayed.”

And it was stated as a fact that the artist who painted it was the cold-blooded wretch who had ruined this poor child, and then had drawn her suffering and dishonour from the life. Now, whether this was really so does not matter for our present purpose ; I will ask you to suppose that it was so, and further, that it was your daughter or your sister that had thus fallen. Let us further suppose that, scorned and cast adrift and ready to perish, she sends to you from her garret entreating your forgiveness—you see she does not know that it is immoral to forgive—anyhow, she asks for one word of love and pity. Do you mean to say that you would refuse it? No, you would not, unless you were as cold as stone ; you *could* not, if the poor thing confessed her error and implored your pity and pardon. No father worthy of the name could do such a thing ; he would take her back, soiled as she was, would cherish her till she died, would leave nothing undone to mitigate her sufferings. It is in vain you tell him that he is doing harm by his weakness, he will do it all the same ; many men have done it. But that is not all. What if the betrayer, the

destroyer too, sent to you from *his* dying bed, imploring you to say one word of mercy before he passed away. What if he acknowledged how vile he had been, and proclaimed himself quite unworthy of your notice; what if he said that he could never forgive himself, but still would fain die at peace with all men; that he wanted nothing from you but your bare forgiveness, do you mean to tell me that you would refuse it? Well, you might do so, but you would only dishonour yourself if you did. But I do not think you would; I think you would say that if the poor wretch was truly penitent, you were not going to harbour resentment against him to the very gates of death. Yes, even in so extreme a case as that you would probably forgive, and the more magnanimous you were, the more likely you would be to forgive, and the more freely you forgave, the more all good men would honour and respect you. And yet we are told that it is idle to expect forgiveness; idle to dream of escaping a single consequence of our sin. But it is not so. That we, "being evil," nevertheless forgive, that we cannot help forgiving, is a proof that the

Heavenly Father, Whose thoughts are so far above our thoughts, will do the same. There was true logic in what a dying man, who had almost broken his wife's heart by his cruelty, said once, "I think God will forgive me because my poor wife has forgiven me, has forgiven all." The idea was, you see, that God could not be less merciful than man. It would put God to shame if His creatures were *more* compassionate than He.

But enough of this objection. I must now remind you—and this is a thing which few of us realize—that God *loves* to forgive; that He never cherishes a grudge, as we do; that His "nature and property is always to have mercy." I must remind you that not only is the Blessed One a thousand times more ready to forgive than we are, but that He is also a thousand times more anxious to forgive than we are to be forgiven. We constantly speak as if it were difficult to persuade God to pardon us, as if we had to wrestle and to pray before He would yield, whereas the difficulty is entirely on our part; it lies here, that we do not really care to be forgiven. He is always ready, always wait-

ing to be gracious; He knocks at our door, rather than we at His. The Shepherd goes after the lost sheep, not the sheep after the Shepherd. If forgiveness is not granted us, it is only because we are not ready for forgiveness; only because we put obstacles in the way. But this brings me to my last point—What are the *conditions of forgiveness*? When, and on what terms does the Almighty and Most Merciful God pardon the sins which we can never alter, and for which we can never atone?

Now, I have spoken of “conditions,” but really and truly there is but *one*—the very same on which we ourselves forgive others. God, for Christ’s sake, forgives sin, when men are *penitent* for their sins. He asks for nothing more.

I do not mean to say, of course, that we can be forgiven without *faith*, but I must ask you to observe that true penitence *involves* and *presupposes* faith, or at least the measure of faith which is necessary to salvation. The belief that God is, and is the Rewarder of them that seek Him,¹ is included in real penitence. A man

¹ Heb. xi. 6.

cannot be sorry that he has sinned against God if he does not believe in a God ; nor will he be sorry that he has sinned against One Who is hard as iron, and does not listen to the penitent's cry. If I do not therefore insist on faith, on belief in God, as one condition of pardon, it is only because such faith is implied in real and scriptural repentance.

Nor do I forget that *confession* and *obedience*, as well as faith, are necessary to forgiveness, but each of these, like faith, is involved in a genuine repentance. That is no repentance at all which does not carry with it the acknowledgment of the wrong done, and the fixed resolve to do better. No man can be sorry for his sins who is too proud to own to them, or who means to sin again, or who denies forgiveness to others.

And when I say that penitence is all that God demands *from us*, I do not overlook what He has demanded from our Saviour ; I do not forget what the Son of God has done and suffered for our pardon ; but it does not concern me to discuss that at this moment. Every Churchman surely knows that " He is the pro-

pitiatio*n* for our sins";¹ that our sins are forgiven us "for His Name's sake";² that remission of sins is to be preached in His Name,³ and so forth. But I am not treating of His atonement now; I shall refer to that hereafter. I am now speaking of what God requires of *us*, and I repeat that all that He demands from us is penitence—penitence, and all that that implies. Do you need proof of this? Then let me remind you that all through the Old Testament pardon is promised to the Jews on their *repentance*. The baptism of John, again, was a "baptism of *repentance* for the remission of sins."⁴ Our Lord's mission was to call sinners to *repentance*; ⁵ and He ordained that "*repentance and remission of sins* should be preached in His Name unto all the nations."⁶ During His lifetime His Apostles "preached everywhere that men should *repent*,"⁷ and on the Day of Pentecost S. Peter's message was, "*Repent* and be baptized every one of you . . . for the *remission* of sins."⁸ A little later it takes this shape, "*Repent* and turn again, that your

¹ 1 John ii. 2.² Ib. ii. 12.³ S. Luke xxiv. 47.⁴ S. Mark i. 4.⁵ Ib. ii. 17.⁶ S. Luke xxiv. 47.⁷ S. Mark vi. 12.⁸ Acts ii. 38.

sins may be blotted out.”¹ I might easily multiply these quotations, but I will content myself with two more ; I will remind you that the man who did repent, who merely cried, “God be merciful to me, a sinner”—this man “went down to his house justified” ; and I will also remind you that Christ has taught us, if our brother sin against us seven times a day, we are to forgive him as often as he repents.

I conclude, therefore, and I conclude on the plain warrants of Holy Writ, that we who have sinned, if we will repent, shall forthwith receive remission of sins. Not because there is any *merit* or *virtue* in repentance, but just because impenitence hinders forgiveness, it makes it impossible. God *cannot* forgive the man who is impenitent, for that man will presently sin again. He cannot forgive, much as He longs so to do, because there is an obstacle in the way. Repentance removes that obstacle ; it opens the door to the exercise of God’s forgiving grace. The moment we repent we are pardoned.

I do not say that pardon is forthwith *conveyed* to us ; that is another matter, as I shall

¹ Acts iii. 19.

show you in a future sermon, but I do affirm that in the counsels of God, the man who repents is forthwith forgiven. The anger of God against sinners is turned away from him; the doom of the sinner is no longer denounced against him; in the view of God he is "justified." He is penitent—that is enough. And this, let me remind you, is the teaching of the Ash Wednesday Collect, the Lenten Collect, we may call it. Its message is that Almighty God forgives "all them that are penitent."

And this message I would leave with you to-day—and what a gospel message it is!—that there is "perfect remission and forgiveness"—*perfect*, not partial; *present*, not future—forgiveness for the repentant soul. There is not one of us can humbly and heartily "confess his sins unto the Lord"—and this we cannot do without the help of the Holy Spirit: repentance is God's gift¹—not one can truly repent without immediate pardon. How immediate, how sure and certain it is, my text testifies. "I said, 'I will confess my transgressions unto the Lord'—and *Thou forgavest the iniquity of my sin!*"

¹ Acts v. 21; xi. 18; 2 Tim. ii. 25.



SERMON IV.

The Absolution or Remission of Sins.

S. JOHN XX. 23

"Whosoever sins ye remit, they are remitted unto them ;
and whosoever sins ye retain, they are retained."

IN the three preceding sermons I have spoken of *sin* and of its *forgiveness*. I now enter on a different part of my subject : I have now to speak of the *conveyance* and *assurance* of forgiveness ; of those means of grace which are ordained of God as instruments whereby we receive the remission of sins, and as pledges to assure us thereof. And the first of these, which alone I can consider to-day, is the message of ABSOLUTION.

But I am reluctant to pass away from the subject of Forgiveness, properly so called, with-

out a brief review of what we have already learnt on this great question, and a brief reference to one or two main points. And there is the more reason for this, because, no doubt, some who are here to-day have not been present before when this question has been considered, and there is perhaps no doctrine of our religion which it is more necessary for them to understand.

1. We have seen, then, in the first place, that all men are sinners ; we have also learned, as I hope, by the teaching of the Holy Ghost, Who alone can “convict the world of sin,”¹ that we ourselves are sinners, “miserable sinners” in God’s sight. We often confess ourselves to be such, we of the Church at any rate : we confess it at Mattins and Evensong, in Litany and Communion Office. If we are not sinners and great sinners, we are constantly saying in the presence of God what is distinctly untrue.

But I can hardly believe that any of *you* dream of denying that you have sinned ; sinned by omission and commission ; sinned by thought, and word, and deed ; sinned in your best deeds

¹S. John xvi. 8.

as well as in your worst ; sinned against God, against your neighbours, and against yourselves. Though you only realize a part, and a very small part, of your sinfulness, yet you do know, and know full well, that you *have* sinned, and that in a variety of ways. You have no idea of maintaining the contrary : you are aware that those who know you best would contradict you if you did. For if *we* do not see that we have “sinned and done wickedly,” others, our wives and children, our brothers and sisters, our friends and servants, they know it very well.

2. And we also understand that these sins of ours, of whatsoever sort they are, cannot be undone, cannot be altered, cannot be expiated by anything that we can do or say or pay. We cannot recall the past, still less can we rewrite it. As we often say, “What is done cannot be undone.” No : we are like the man who owed ten thousand talents, and, like him, we “have nothing to pay.” We are helpless, “tied and bound with the chain of our sins,” and we can do nothing to set ourselves free.

3. But we saw last Sunday that though we cannot *pay*, God can *pardon*. He can “freely

forgive us the debt." We heard that our heavenly Father, Whose property it is to have mercy and to forgive, both can and will forgive us all our trespasses. We saw that God is at least as free to forgive as we are, and I showed you that we men do and will forgive, whatever philosophers may preach to the contrary. We forgive on one condition—that the offender is sincerely repentant—and God forgives upon the same terms. But here a new point presents itself to our view; now I have to speak for a moment of the Atonement. We have no right to forgive, except at our own expense. We are not entitled to exercise clemency, if it compromises or injures others, if it ministers, for example, to impunity, and so encourages others to sin. And the same remark applies to the Most High. We cannot suppose that He is less just, less law-abiding, less concerned for the interests of righteousness than His creatures. If He forgives, it must be at His own expense, not at that of justice! There must be no violation of law, no setting it aside. The penalty denounced against wrong-doing must be paid, and paid to the full: the cup of retribution

must be drained, drained to the last drop. God can only forgive when justice as well as mercy is satisfied.

Now it was, among other things, to satisfy the claims of justice, as I understand it, that Christ our Lord lived and suffered and died. He, the Very and Eternal God, became man, and as man took the burden and the curse of man's sin upon Himself. He did not set aside law, but He satisfied it. God, the sinned-against, in the person of Christ "suffered for sins, the just for the unjust,"¹ He "bare our sins in His own body on the tree."² He was "made sin for us, Who knew no sin."³ If He forgives sin, consequently, it is at His own expense. The majesty of law is vindicated; the doom of death denounced against the sinner is not weakly or arbitrarily abrogated, still less is it entailed upon an innocent person, but it is voluntarily endured. Jesus Christ, God and man, has "made a full, perfect, and sufficient sacrifice, oblation, and satisfaction for the sins of the whole world." Because of the perfect life, the perfect obedience, the precious

¹ 1 Peter iii. 18.

² Ib. ii. 24.

³ 2 Cor. v. 21.

death, God can be "just and the justifier of him that believeth."¹ He has not repealed any law, but He has satisfied it Himself: He has "magnified it and made it honourable."²

"Day and night our Jesus makes no pause;
Pleads His own fulfilment of all laws,
Veils with His perfections mortal flaws,
Clears the culprit, pleads the desperate cause,
Plucks the dead from Death's devouring jaws
And the worm that gnaws."

This is why God *can* forgive, can forgive consistently with justice. And if He *can*, we know that He *will*, just because He is "our Father" and is "loving unto every man"; because He is ever yearning over us, ever waiting to be gracious, ever wanting to set us free. We must never think that we have to *persuade* God to forgive us, to *overcome* His reluctance, to *disarm* His vengeance. He is always most "ready to forgive and most willing to pardon," and that because of His deep compassion, because of His "tender love towards mankind," because of "the pitifulness of His great mercy."

¹ Rom. iii. 26.

² Isa. xlii. 21.

4. And we also learned (or I trust we did) one other lesson last Sunday, namely, that the only thing that can stand in the way of our forgiveness is impenitence—impenitence and unbelief. Much as the Father of spirits yearns to forgive, He cannot forgive the man who does not believe in Him—for such men will never come to Him for pardon; nor can He forgive the man who is not sorry for his sins, for that man will presently sin again. I say, He “cannot” do it, because He cannot do wrong, and it would be a distinct wrong to morality to pardon the unrepentant—it would be to encourage men in sin. Hence it is that God demands of us penitence and faith. Not because—I must repeat this, for it is an important point—not because either repentance or faith is meritorious: not because either, or both, can deserve God’s favour and so earn His pardon: but because impenitence and unbelief prevent His forgiving grace; they tie God’s hands, they estop Him from the exercise of His prerogative of mercy. We learnt, I trust, that whilst the Almighty asks no merits from us, no payment, no *quid pro quo*, He does ask that we shall not

hinder or *frustrate* His forgiveness. It is for this reason, as I reminded you, that God demands penitence and faith and obedience as indispensable conditions of forgiveness.

But wherever and whenever such sincere penitence is found in any soul of man—and only by the operation of God's Holy Spirit can repentance be wrought in us: only *He* can "create in us new and contrite hearts"—then that soul is straightway forgiven; it is then and there "justified" at the bar and in the mind of God: it has, then and there, "perfect remission and forgiveness"; forgiveness without works, without merits, without sacraments.

Yes, but though the penitent soul has forgiveness in the heart of God as soon as it repents, it has received no token of forgiveness from His hand; there has been no conveyance, no sign and seal, of remission. Now these two things—*pardon* and the *assurance* of pardon—are entirely distinct, as a moment's reflection will show. Let us take an illustration. Here is a man lying under sentence of death in one of our prisons. Formal sentence has been pronounced upon him, and he is only waiting for

the hour to strike for his execution. But for some reason or other the Queen exercises her prerogative of mercy, and grants him a free pardon. Now that man is really forgiven, as soon as the Queen's grace has decided that he may and shall be set free. He is really and fully justified in the council chamber where his case is considered. But the man knows nothing of this, and the world knows nothing of it : the pardon has not been proclaimed or conveyed. He regards himself, and the world regards him, as a criminal under sentence of death. More than that, unless something is done, he *will* die ; the sentence will take effect unless it is as formally rescinded as it was formally pronounced. Unless by royal warrant, under her sign and seal, or by other legal process his pardon is notified and secured, he will die the death. And so the warrant of forgiveness is in due course conveyed to the authorities, and they proceed to the condemned cell, and they produce the instrument and show the man that his sentence is cancelled and he is free. It may be days or weeks after he was forgiven in the counsels of the sovereign, but not until then

does he hear of his pardon ; not until then does he receive it ; not until then is he, or can he be, released.

Now I think that this homely illustration may enable us to understand the difference between our being *forgiven* and our being *assured* of forgiveness. The great King, the Judge of all, forgives every penitent soul the moment it is penitent, but that soul does not *know* that it is pardoned—perhaps it is not free from the penalty—until the message of pardon is conveyed to it. Here, therefore, we proceed to ask—What provision has God made for the conveyance and assurance of forgiveness to the faithful soul ? Does He speak directly, with His still small voice, to the heart, or does He send a message, or does He give a sign, or what ?

Now, it is often remarked by a certain class of Christians that God would never forgive a soul of man and yet leave that soul in any doubt or uncertainty on the subject. Well, without going so far as to say that He would *never* do this, I think we may allow that He does not design, in His exceeding great love to us, that men who *are* forgiven should remain in igno-

rance of the fact. So far we are agreed. But when they go on, as they do, to say that God assures the believer, directly, by the voice of His Spirit speaking in the soul, that he is forgiven—here we part company. We must part company because we of the Church cannot find any warrant for such a statement in the pages of Holy Writ. There we often read of forgiveness, or of healing, which resembles forgiveness, and we often trace there the assurance of forgiveness, but we always find such healing or such forgiveness conveyed, not by an impression within, but by an operation from without. I do not say that those whom Christ restored to health did not feel in their body that they were healed of that plague¹—we know that some of them did—but I say that health was conveyed to them and pardon was assured to them by some outward act. Sometimes He spoke the absolving word, “Thy sins be forgiven thee.”² Sometimes He laid His hands on the sick folk, and so healed them.³ Others were made whole by the virtue that went out of Him⁴ when they

¹S. Mark v. 29.

²S. Matt. ix. 2; S. Luke viii. 48.

³S. Mark vi. 5.

⁴Ib. v. 30.

touched Him. Now, He would make clay and anoint the eyes of the blind ;¹ now, He would put His fingers into the deaf man's ears.² Sometimes He merely said, "Go thy way : thy son liveth," but there was always a message or a medium of some kind, always an external act. It is most necessary that you should remember this. Our Lord did not certify men either of healing or of pardon by means of a voice or whisper of the Spirit in their hearts, but by a voice which they could hear with their ears, or a touch which they could feel in their flesh. Not, I repeat, subjectively, by an intuition within, but objectively, by a word or work outside of them did the Son of God convey blessing and healing and pardon in the days of His flesh. And so, the same Scripture teaches us, in precisely the same way does He convey the *assurance* of forgiveness still. You are not entitled to expect any special revelation in your secret soul, proclaiming that your iniquity is pardoned ; God never makes such revelations to us when He has made other provision, and in this case He *has* made other provision. He

¹ S. John ix. 6.² S. Mark vii. 33.

certifies the penitent of pardon, not by any witness of the Spirit—the Spirit witnesses that we are “sons of God,” and we may be prodigal and unforgiven sons—but by a human voice and a sacramental touch, by the voice of His ambassador pronouncing the word of Absolution, and by the touch of His hand in Baptism and the Supper of the Lord. These are God’s signs and seals; it is thus that He *conveys* pardon, and *certifies* us of acceptance. And it is of the first of these, the message of Absolution, that I now desire to speak to you more particularly.

I shall make no attempt, however, to consider this question in all its bearings.¹ All that I can hope to do is to throw some light on the doctrine of Absolution, or at least to disabuse your minds of some of the errors and prejudices which cluster round it. It is often misunderstood, often cruelly misrepresented, whereas there is, really and truly, no part of our religion which is more reasonable and comfortable and common-sense.

¹ I have discussed the doctrine of Absolution and our Forms of Absolution in *Church or Chapel?* Chaps. xxxiv.-xxxvi. And I have treated of the minister of Absolution in *The Mistakes of Modern Nonconformity*, pp. 74-76.

Now the prejudice which exists against the principle and exercise of Absolution, against the very idea of the priest pronouncing or conveying any "remission of sins," arises principally from the belief that he claims in virtue of his "priesthood" to have some mysterious power, of himself, *ex mero motu*, to forgive sins. The idea is that he puts himself in the place of God, or arrogates to himself one of the prerogatives of God, namely, that of mercy. There is also an idea abroad that he claims the power of forgiving men who are quite unfit for forgiveness—namely, the impenitent and unbelieving, men whom God does not and cannot forgive. And, lastly, there is an idea in some minds that the sinner is lulled to a false security by the sentence of Absolution, and leans on *that* rather than on the mercy of God in Christ. I shall hope to show you how widely removed the Church's doctrine of Absolution is from any such errors and dangers.

1. In the first place, then, her teaching about Absolution starts with the distinct understanding that *only God can forgive sins*. She assumes this as a self-evident truth. It is self-evident,

because sin being an offence against God, only God can in the nature of things remit it. Only the person injured can pardon this or that injury; precisely so, only God can pardon offences against God. But though the Church does not waste time in proving this, she implies most distinctly that this is so. It will be enough if I remind you of the language of our Absolutions, of which we have three in the Prayer Book. Take first that in the daily offices: "Almighty God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ . . . HE pardoneth and absolveth," etc. So with that in the Communion Service: "Almighty God . . . have mercy upon you; pardon and deliver you from all your sins." And so finally with that in the Order for the Visitation of the Sick: "Our Lord Jesus Christ . . . of His great mercy forgive thee thine offences." Nothing can be clearer than that our Absolutions ascribe the power to forgive sins to God alone. And so in a score of ways do the rest of our formularies, our Confessions, Collects, Communion Service, and the rest. They are all rooted and grounded on this basal principle.

2. And now, turning to the idea that the priest claims a power to absolve persons who are morally or spiritually unfitted for Absolution, it is strange how such a prejudice could ever arise, in the very teeth of the Prayer Book, which expressly limits the blessings of Absolution *to the penitent*—in other words, to those whom God has already pardoned. Our *formulae* are explicit on this point. “He pardoneth and absolveth all them that *truly repent* and *unfeignedly believe* His holy Gospel.” So again in the Communion Office: “Almighty God, Who of His great mercy hath promised forgiveness of sins to all them that *with hearty repentance and true faith* turn unto Him, have mercy upon you.” And again in the Office for the Sick. “Our Lord Jesus Christ, Who hath left power to His Church to absolve all sinners who *truly repent and believe* in Him, . . . forgive thee thine offences.” And with these words the rest of our standards and services are in perfect harmony. It is clear, therefore, that as the priest does not and cannot, so long as he keeps to the Prayer Book, claim any power to forgive in his own name, so, just as little or even less,

does he claim any power to convey forgiveness to the impenitent. Indeed, any such claim would be, on the face of it, monstrous and absurd, for if even God cannot forgive the unrepentant—and He cannot—certainly man cannot do it.

3. But perhaps you object that the sinner is led to put a superstitious trust in the Absolution instead of looking to God for pardon. If so, which I do not for a moment believe, then I say that he does it at his own risk, and because of his own folly. He cannot blame the Church for it, for the Church's message could not be more plain and evangelical than it is. You may tell me that in one place the priest says, "*I absolve thee from all thy sins.*" Yes, he does, but then this same man has said just before, in the same breath, "*Our Lord Jesus Christ . . . of His great mercy forgive thee thine offences. And by His authority committed to me I absolve thee from all thy sins.*" "*By His authority*"—so far as that extends and no farther. But where has Christ given any authority to the priest to pardon in *his own* name, or to promise GOD's pardon to the impenitent? No clergyman *has*

any such power, and no minister of our Church can *claim* any such power, for the Prayer Book would flatly contradict him if he did. He “cannot go beyond the Word of the Lord to do less or more.”

But if you still say that this function of Absolution is likely to mislead, then I must point out to you that what you are really blaming and quarrelling with is, not the Prayer Book, or the English Church, but our Lord and Master Jesus Christ. For He it was, our Lord and our God, Who said to the Apostles the very day of His resurrection, “As My Father sent Me, even so send I you. . . . Whosoever sins ye remit, they are remitted unto them, and whosoever sins ye retain, they are retained.” According to you, He ought not to have said anything of the kind. You say, virtually, that it is a pity the Lord Christ did not know better than to use such dangerous words.

And why is it that our Lord has “given such authority unto men”? Why is it that He has commissioned His ministers to proclaim and convey remission of sins? Because it is a part of His gospel. It is that sinners may have a

distinct assurance of their forgiveness. Our Sacred Lord is no longer with us to say, "Thy sins be forgiven thee." But He sends His ministers, just as the Father sent Him, to say the words in His name and in His stead. They are His ambassadors. They cannot forgive, but they can bring a *message* of forgiveness. You remember what I said just now about the prisoner under sentence of death. The governor of the prison who showed him that he was pardoned did not forgive; it was not for him to remit any sentence; all he did was to inform the pardoned man that he *was* pardoned. And this is all that the priest does or can do in Absolution. He has no power to remit one sin. But he has power, and he has received a commandment to declare and pronounce to the penitent the absolution and remission of their sins. This commandment he has received from our Lord, Who sent him to "preach repentance and remission of sins."

And therefore it is that this ministry of reconciliation, this function of Absolution, is exercised amongst us every Sunday and indeed every day. Our Church would not be a branch

of Christ's Church, if it had no such message, or at least, it would be leaving undone one part of the work which Christ founded it to do. But it is not so. At the commencement of this Service I conveyed to you, if repentant, the pardon of your sins. I do it again at its close. "Almighty God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ . . . He pardoneth and absolveth all them that truly repent and unfeignedly believe His holy Gospel." Are you heartily sorry for your past sins? Do you forsake them, steadfastly purposing to lead a new life? Is your trust in God's mercy, not in your merits? Then you have received, not from me, but from the God of all grace, "perfect remission and forgiveness." You have received it *through* me, His unworthy minister.





SERMON V.

The One Baptism for the Remission of Sins.

ACTS II. 38 (*Revised Version*).

"Repent ye, and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ unto the remission of your sins."



HOPE it is hardly needful for me, after what was said last Sunday, to remind you again that the forgiveness of sins and the assurance of forgiveness are two entirely different things. And yet these things are so often identified or confused, that it may be well once more to remark on the distinction. The act of forgiveness, properly so called, whether on the part of God or of man—whether God forgives us or we forgive one another—is a mental process, an act of the will or of the heart, whereby the offender is pardoned and

taken into favour. In the case of Almighty God it does not involve, as it does in our case, any change of *disposition*—there is no transition from enmity or alienation to amity and good will, for the Eternal Father is always loving, always longing to forgive His children. No, the change is on *our* part, not His: in our minds—the word “repentance” really means “a change of mind”—not in His of Whom we read that in Him is no variation,¹ and that He is “not a son of man that He should repent.”² God’s forgiveness follows, it accrues, directly there is that change in *us*, in our disposition, which makes it safe and lawful for us to be forgiven. As soon as any man is penitent for his sin, penitent enough to recognize it and grieve over it and confess it and turn from it, the Most Merciful, the God of all grace, then and there forgives him. But the *conveyance* of forgiveness, the attestation and assurance thereof, either on God’s part or ours, is not a mere mental process—it is an overt act, a deed, a procedure of some kind or other. Something is showed or done, outwardly, something must

¹ S. James i. 17.

² Numb. xxiii. 19.

be done, some message sent or some token given whereby the wrong-doer is released, whereby both he and others are assured of his pardon.¹ I illustrated the distinction, you will remember, last Sunday, by showing how a sovereign forgives, silently, privately, in his own heart, or in his council chamber, and how he then signs and seals and sends a formal warrant of forgiveness. I may illustrate it again by the parable which pre-eminently pictures our forgiveness—that of the Prodigal Son. When he was a great way off, his father saw him and had compassion on him. Now that compassion was the real forgiveness; the prodigal was pardoned whilst he was still at a distance, but it was not until the old man “ran to meet him and fell on his neck and kissed him much”² that the unhappy youth was assured of his pardon. Unseen, the mind and heart of the father forgave; he no sooner saw his child than he forgave, but the many kisses, the warm embrace, perhaps the tears of joy, certainly the words of welcome, *testified* to the prodigal that he was indeed forgiven, and only

¹ Cf. 2 Sam. xii. 13.

² S. Luke xv. 20 (R.V.)

some action of this kind could have testified it. I think you will all understand the difference. And I hope it is unnecessary to say that what I am now discussing is, not the forgiveness of sins, but the *assurance* of forgiveness. In other words, I am endeavouring, these last Sundays of Lent, to tell you how God *conveys* to the repentant sinner the knowledge that his sin is forgiven and his iniquity pardoned.

And in entering upon this question last Sunday, I used words which I daresay did not appear to you at the time to be at all singular, but which, nevertheless, strike at the root of very much of our popular religion, which knock the bottom out of what is known as Revivalism, which do away with the penitent form and the praying men into liberty, and the crying out that we are saved. I said that Holy Scripture lends no countenance to the idea, widespread though it is, that when God forgives, He invariably or ordinarily bestows on the sinner an inward sense of His forgiveness. I said that it was no doctrine of Christ or His Apostles that when a man's sins are pardoned, he is forthwith certified of it by a voice speaking in

the heart, or by an ecstasy of joy which floods his soul. I insisted that the assurance of forgiveness of which we read in Holy Writ, just like the acts of healing recorded there, always proceeds from without: it is wrought, it is conveyed by the voice or the act of another. I observed that our gracious Father has appointed ordinances, actions, formalities, for the conveyance of His pardoning grace and mercy. And I added that these were three in number—and all of them instituted by our Lord Himself—namely, first, the message of Absolution which He has entrusted to His ministers, “Whosoever sins ye forgive, they are forgiven unto them”;¹ secondly, the Sacrament of Baptism, “Arise, and be baptized, and wash away thy sins”;² and lastly, the Sacrament of the Holy Supper, “This is My blood of the covenant which is shed for many unto the remission of sins.”³ Of the first of the three, Absolution, I spoke last Sunday; it is of the second that I now propose to treat—of that “one Baptism for the remission of sins” in which we so often profess to believe.

¹S. John xx. 23.

²Acts xxii. 16.

³S. Matt. xxvi. 28.

You must not suppose, however, because I have said that I am about to speak of Holy Baptism, that I have any idea of considering any aspect or effect of this Sacrament but one. I shall say nothing about Baptism as the instrument of our regeneration, of the new birth of water and the Holy Ghost, and as little of Baptism as the rite whereby we are grafted into Christ's body, are admitted, that is to say, into His universal Church ; I shall only regard it as the instrument whereby, in those who receive it rightly—I quote the words of the 27th Article—"the promise of the forgiveness of sins is visibly signed and sealed." I am to speak of this Sacrament as an act which *conveys* forgiveness and *assures* us of pardon, and I am to consider it in this light alone.

Now I cannot but be aware that the mere mention of Baptism as in any way connected with the forgiveness of sins is disturbing to some devout Christians ; it alarms them ; they think forthwith that we are in danger of perverting the Gospel of Christ or of putting mere forms in the place of personal religion. Some

such persons, I can well believe, there are amongst us now. If so, I will say to them that I respect and honour the feeling which animates them, for they are jealous with a godly jealousy: they are concerned lest we should put an ordinance, a form (as they call it) in the place of, or in competition with Christ and His cross, and with the work of God the Holy Ghost within the soul. All the same, I must tell them plainly that it is a part, yes, and an essential part, of God's revelation, an essential part of New Testament teaching, that Baptism does bring to those who receive it aright—that is to say, those who repent—the remission of sins; that it is a channel appointed by God Himself for the conveyance of His forgiveness; it is a sign and seal and warrant to certify us thereof.

I say that this is a part, and an unmistakable part, of the teaching of God's Word. No candid and unbiased mind, none that can divest itself of prejudices and just take the Bible as it finds it, can have any doubt on that score. Why, even the baptism of John, John who baptized with water and *not* with the Holy

Ghost,¹ is called "the baptism of repentance unto remission of sins."² Void as it was of life-giving energy, yet it carried with it, it conveyed, pardon to the penitent—I need hardly say that it brought remission only to the penitent. God had already, in His secret counsel, in His loving compassion, pardoned every contrite heart found among the multitudes who gathered round the Baptist in the wilderness of Judæa and the Jordan valley, but I do not read that he had secretly assured them of forgiveness; there is no hint of any witness within them. On the contrary, it was by a form, by a ritual act, by an ordinance, too, which was symbolical of cleansing, of washing, that pardon was conveyed to them. I do not think that this will be denied.

But if the baptism of John was thus efficacious, if even that rite, which was so soon to pass away, carried pardon in its train, how much more the Baptism which our Lord presently instituted, instituted indeed as soon as He began to teach and to preach, instituted whilst John was still baptizing "unto remission of

¹ Acts i. 5; xi. 2.

² S. Mark i. 4.

sins.” We are not told, I admit, anything about its effect and operation in the Gospels; we are only told that Jesus “made and baptized more disciples than John.”¹ But still the inference is certain, that Christ’s baptism, even before the outpouring of the Holy Ghost, cannot have done less for men than John’s baptism did—it can never be that God gave *less* through the Son of His love than through the servant—and John’s baptism conveyed, as we have seen, the remission of sins. It cannot be that the Gospels tell of two baptisms, administered at the same time,² one of which, that of man, did bring forgiveness: and the other, that of the God-man, brought none.

And—let me remark here—though our Lord did not Himself, in so many words, connect Baptism with pardon, yet He did connect it with salvation, which must include pardon. For He did not say, as certain of our present-day preachers so often do, “Only believe”; He did not represent salvation as contingent on mere faith, still less upon feeling; no, He said that Baptism had to do with salvation as well

¹ S. John iv. 1.

² S. John iii. 22, 23.

as belief. For these were His words—and I ask you in passing to consider how few of our so-called “gospel preachers” would dare to use them, or ever dream of using them; to consider whether they would not denounce it as dangerous or misleading language, if we used it at a revival meeting—*these* were His words: “He that believeth, and is baptized, shall be saved.”¹

But if there is any doubt lingering in your minds as to the effect of Christian Baptism during our Saviour’s lifetime, there should be none as to its efficacy on and after the day of Pentecost, as indeed my text plainly shows. For we have in these words the final message of that day, the practical conclusion of S. Peter’s teaching, under the guidance of the Holy Ghost. What was it, then, that He said in answer to the question, “What must we do?” His reply was—and I ask you again whether you can imagine any of our revivalists or of our so styled “evangelical” divines using similar language—He said, “Repent and be baptized every one of you . . . *unto the remission of your sins.*” It

¹S. Mark xvi. 16.

is not penitent form religion this: I fear that in some quarters it would not pass for Gospel preaching at all, for observe, it unmistakably connects forgiveness with a form, a ritual act, the act of Baptism. Why, I never hear of our revivalists mentioning Baptism; I believe that Nonconformists generally seldom mention it, except to disparage it, except to caution men against ascribing any efficacy to it. The Salvation Army has put it on record that this institution of Christ is "allowable"—"allowable but optional," and it insists that it is "in no way binding upon us," in no way necessary to salvation. Yet "the first" of the Apostles, on the day of the Spirit's coming, preached it "unto the forgiveness of sins."

But there is another Scripture to which I must briefly direct your attention. Do you remember what was said to S. Paul, and this after the Lord had met him and had spoken to him from Heaven; that is to say, after he had been miraculously arrested and converted? In the first place, "the Lord Jesus Who appeared to him in the way" did not Himself tell him what to do. No, He has messengers and

ministers, and so He sends S. Paul into the city that he may be taught of Ananias—to show us that it is His way and His pleasure to teach men through the agency of man. And what does Ananias, who was sent of God to S. Paul and was taught of God how to deal with him, what does he say to this anxious penitent? His words were these, “Arise, and be baptized, and wash away thy sins.” Observe, he first mentions the ordinance of washing and then connects it with the washing away of *sin*. There is no escape from these words. What can we, what can any honest man conclude from such language, but that Baptism is the form, the instrument through which forgiveness—God’s free and gracious and unmerited forgiveness of the penitent—is conveyed to the soul? We see, therefore, that even S. Paul, chosen messenger of Heaven though he was, and supernaturally converted though he was, was not assured or possessed of pardon by any inward emotion or ecstasy; he was assured of forgiveness by the now often scorned or depreciated Sacrament of Baptism.

I forbear to quote other warrants of Holy

Scripture, though it would be easy enough so to do. But it is either unnecessary or it would be useless. If the texts I have just cited convince you, it is unnecessary to allege any more, and if these do not convince you, I fear none would. I therefore proceed to show that in this teaching, as I have just expounded it to you, this doctrine—sometimes described as “one of the soul-destroying errors of the Church of England,” though it is the ancient doctrine, as the Nicene Creed shows—this belief that Holy Baptism is one of God’s appointed ways of *assuring* men of their forgiveness, there is nothing dangerous, nothing misleading, any more than there is in the belief that pardon is conveyed to the penitent, as I showed you last Sunday, in and through the message of Absolution. I shall hope to convince you that the distrust and aversion with which this teaching is regarded is the result of misconception. We first misunderstand the doctrine entirely, and then it is no wonder that we discover that it is not evangelical and are persuaded that it cannot be true.

But here I must make a personal explanation.

You will find that I shall say again some things which I have said already. I do it advisedly. Such repetition is necessary, if these truths are to be firmly fixed in your minds. Without it I should fear that they would soon be forgotten.

1. Now, the first point to be observed, as before, is that the act of forgiveness—forgiveness, that is to say, as distinguished from the assurance of forgiveness—is wholly and entirely the act of God. With that man has and can have nothing whatever to do. How can he have anything to do with remitting sins which were committed *against God*? Only the injured person can pardon the injury done to him, and Eternal God is the Person injured by our sins. Let us be quite clear on this point: man may convey God's message of forgiveness, and he may also use the instruments, the warrants ordained of God to certify men of their forgiveness, but more than this He cannot do. Only God can forgive sins.

2. And a second point to be again remarked and enforced is that even God Himself will not and indeed *cannot* forgive those who are morally

or spiritually unfit for forgiveness. Though God is omnipotent, yet He cannot forgive the impenitent, just because He cannot do wrong: and it would be wrong, it would be to encourage men in sin, if God forgave men who were not sorry for their sins, or who did not mean to forsake them. The very righteousness and purity of God forbid Him to pardon the unrepentant. Nor can He pardon the unbelieving. Not only do such men make Him a liar, but such men will not come to Him for pardon, nor do they even recognize the need of it.

3. And just as Almighty God cannot pardon those who are unfitted for pardon, so neither can God grant nor man convey any real *assurance* of pardon to such persons. I need not say that God can never assure of pardon any soul of man which He has not already pardoned, for that is obvious. But just as little, nay, even less, can any man in such a case convey a pardon in God's name. He cannot go beyond or behind God; cannot do what God is powerless to do. He is a mere agent, a messenger; he can only do what God authorizes him to do. And therefore, just as he cannot convey any

Absolution to the impenitent, so neither can he, baptize whom he will, bring any remission of sins to persons who are unfitted to receive it. We nowhere gather that Baptism, or any rite, or any chain of rites, can bring forgiveness to men whom God has not already forgiven. This is what good people are afraid of—lest we should represent the Sacrament of Baptism as a mechanical or magical thing ; as *in itself*, quite apart from the state of the recipient, a saving ordinance ; as conveying pardon *ex opere operato* to all who are baptized. But it is not so, and they really ought to have observed of themselves that it is not so. They ought to have remarked that it is hardly likely that we should claim for ourselves powers which are not possessed by God Himself. A very little reflection would have taught them that, in the very nature of things, Baptism can only *seal* the pardon of the Most High on those who by penitence and faith are fitted for pardon, and have already been pardoned by His royal bounty and clemency.

You see, then, how this sacramental teaching is safeguarded ; how it *cannot* minister to for-

malism or superstition; how it is perfectly reasonable and righteous. We acknowledge "one Baptism for the remission of sins," but we never dream that the act of Baptism forgives, or that all the baptized are forgiven; what Baptism does is to *convey* God's forgiveness to those whom God wills to forgive.

And so eminently safe and reasonable is this doctrine, that of late some who once stoutly resisted it, and called it "soul-destroying," have been compelled, in spite of their prejudices, to acknowledge that it is both sound and scriptural—in those cases at least where Baptism is ministered to *adults*. Now, they only deny that it brings any remission to infants. They say they can understand a grown-up man, who can repent and can believe, receiving remission of sins in Baptism, but they cannot bring themselves to admit that it conveys any such remission to unconscious infants, because such infants can "do nothing" towards it.

But what, let me ask you, are the sins with which unconscious infants are chargeable? Not *actual* sin, for they cannot commit it. They are incapable of any sin except what is called

“original” or “birth sin”—that sin which they did nothing to contract, which they derive from our first parents, and which, really and truly, is not so much *sin* as the “fault and corruption of our nature.”¹ They have done nothing to incur it; why, then, must they “do something” to rid themselves thereof? You tell me that unconsciousness is no bar to their being regarded as children of wrath;² then why is this same unconsciousness to be a fatal obstacle to their being, by God’s mercy, through Christ’s ordinance, delivered from sin and saved from wrath? Why should not Baptism bring pardon to them as well as to adults, who, in addition to the sin or corruption which they share with children, have committed many actual transgressions? To us it seems that it would be monstrous, that it would be grossly unjust, if it did not. In that case, the Judge of all the earth would not be doing right.

But the error which lies at the bottom of this objection, and has started it, is one which Protestants, who repudiate all idea of human merit, should certainly and above all persons

¹ Article IX.

² Eph. ii. 3.

have been exempt from ; it is, at its root, the belief that there is after all a certain meritoriousness in our repentance or our faith. Otherwise, they could not talk of infants "doing nothing" towards their forgiveness. Why, we can *none* of us do anything. All we can do is to *hinder* forgiveness, to put obstacles in the way, and impenitence is such an obstacle, and so is unbelief. And such obstacles adults *can* put in the way and infants *cannot*. Consciousness can frustrate God's pardoning love : unconsciousness cannot ; unconsciousness cannot earn forgiveness or in any way deserve it, but consciousness cannot either. I say, therefore, that it is easier, it is more evangelical, to believe that Baptism brings forgiveness to infants who cannot "do anything" to earn it, than to adults who can "do something" to frustrate it ; to infants who have committed no actual sins, rather than to adults who have committed many ; to infants of whom is the Kingdom of Heaven, rather than to adults who must become like infants if they are to enter it.¹

¹ S. Mark x. 14, 15.

I trust therefore, that this sermon has at least made one point clear to you, namely, that Baptism is an instrument, a means, a channel—it is no more—whereby all but the impenitent or unbelieving receive remission of sins, and is also a pledge to assure them thereof.





SERMON VI.

The Blood Shed for the Remission of Sins.

S. MATT. XXVI. 28 (*Revised Version*).

"This is My Blood of the Covenant, which is shed for many unto remission of sins."

MY proper subject to-day is this—the Holy Communion of Christ's Body and Blood as a means whereby we receive the remission of sins and a pledge to assure us thereof. But I am reluctant to enter upon it without some fresh appeals and some further instructions, and these will constitute the major part of this discourse.

For you will readily understand that I am more concerned—very much more—that we should *have* remission of sins than that we should comprehend anything and everything about the

assurance of such remission. We can be saved without the latter : we cannot be saved without the former. Forgiveness is necessary to our eternal life : assurance is only necessary to our present comfort and peace.

Indeed, as I look back on this course of sermons it seems to me that the two things which it chiefly concerns you to know are these—First, that you have “sinned against the Lord” ; and secondly, that God for Christ’s sake will forgive you your sin—if you are penitent—forgive you before you are formally assured of forgiveness. I do not say for one moment that we need know nothing else ; if so, what is the rest of the Bible for, and what have I myself been talking about ? No, it is our privilege and our duty to know and believe *everything* that Eternal God has revealed, but it is not necessary to understand everything in the Bible, or, indeed, much that is in the Bible, in order to be saved. But it *is* necessary that we should be convicted of sin ; it *is* necessary that we should be sincerely penitent, and should come to God, the Merciful Receiver of all penitent sinners, for pardon. Until

this is done we are all and altogether wrong.

You will, therefore, I trust, excuse me if, before I speak of this last and most blessed assurance of forgiveness given us in the Holy Eucharist, I recur for a few moments to the subject of our *sins*. I cannot but fear that there is some unreality in our language and attitude on this matter—we are all so ready to confess ourselves sinners in public, and so slow in private to think that we have done anything that is at all dreadful. We are something like the Ancient Mariner, whose vessel seemed as but “a painted ship upon a painted sea.” Our sins are in a perpetual haze; they are shadowy and indistinct; they are but phantom forms to us. Yet sin is a real thing and a very terrible thing—our own sins are real and terrible, and we ought to know it. “There is nothing, I believe,” says a thoughtful writer, “which at the present time needs more to be insisted on, in theology and in gospel preaching, than the objectivity and reality of guilt.”¹ Well, we have sinned, whether we know it or not: we are guilty in the sight of God, and this Lent

¹Denney. *Studies in Theology*, p. 94.

ought not to pass without our realizing it; it has failed of its purpose if it does.

And if we do not realize our guilt, if *you* are not concerned about your sins, why is it? Partly perhaps because you have taken no pains to find them out—some of us, perchance, have been very much afraid of finding them out; there is nothing that we dread more. We have not looked into our lives; have not “called to remembrance the days that are past”; have not set our misdeeds before us; in fact, we have not attempted anything like self-examination. We do not know our sins, because we do not know ourselves. And it takes as much pains and trouble—perhaps more, because of the “deceitfulness of sin,” because we are all so lenient to ourselves, so disposed to judge our own actions favourably—it takes as much trouble to know ourselves thoroughly as to learn a language or master a science. But there is another and a more powerful reason why we do not feel the burden and the shame and the misery of our sins, if indeed we do not; it is that we have not been “taught of God.” For, examine ourselves as we may, we shall

never realize our guilt, except by *inspiration*, except by the still small voice of God, heard in our hearts. The thoughts of our hearts are to be cleansed, as the Communion collect reminds us, by the inspiration of God's Holy Spirit. None but the Comforter can be the convicter, can "reprove the world of sin," can "create in us new and contrite hearts." And if we have not had this silent teaching of the Holy Ghost, granting us repentance,¹ and working in us compunction, it is not because we have not received the Spirit : that was given to us at our Baptism, and given again at our Confirmation ; that has often striven with us ; it is because we have "grieved" and "quenched" and silenced it. I beg you to remember this—that if we are not now conscious of our sins, or are not contrite for them, it is only because our hearts have not been touched, and our eyes have not been opened, by the ever-blessed Spirit of God. We have not been willing in the day of His power.²

And this is the real and the only reason why we are not forgiven, if such is the case. We *are* forgiven, if we are not impenitent ; and if we

¹ Acts xi. 18 ; v. 31.

² Psalm cx. 3.

are impenitent, it is only because the Spirit has not been permitted to work in us true repentance. I hope you have thoroughly understood what I have said more than once—that every man is forgiven who does not put obstacles—to wit, impenitence or unbelief—in the way of his forgiveness. There is no difficulty, no delay, no bargaining, on God's part. "The heart of the Eternal is most wonderfully kind," and He is always waiting to be gracious; waiting for us to be willing to receive His grace. If I have not made this clear to you, that the great God loves us, and loves to forgive us, and forgives us freely, without any payment or propitiation on our part, then I have altogether failed of my object. If you are hoping for pardon because of something that you can do, or give, or feel, then you must have been badly instructed by me or by others. If you are trusting—I will not say to your own *righteousness*, for we none of us can make much boast of that—but to your own penitence, or your faith, or your desire to amend, you are altogether on the wrong lines. I should not, however, wonder greatly if it were so, for self-trust dies very hard, and it has

as many heads as the hydra ; if it is wounded in one place, it revives and thrives in another. The sturdy Protestant, who scoffs at the bare idea of merit in works—in alms, and fastings, and penances, and pilgrimages, for example—sometimes avoids Scylla only to fall into Charybdis ; he puts his penitence into the place of pilgrimages, and ascribes to faith the virtue which others do to fasts—that is to say, he trusts to his own merits in another shape. He recognizes no meritorious efficacy in any external acts, but he finds it in his mental processes. I hope that you, however, have learnt that the one can no more recommend you, or reconcile you, to God than the other. God asks for no payment, no equivalent. His pardon is absolutely free. He forgives of His royal bounty. All that He demands, in His unspeakable love, is—I say it once more—that we should not *hinder* His forgiving grace.

But if we *are* forgiven, if God has of His great mercy created in us that “new and contrite heart,” which is the one condition of pardon, it does not follow, as I have said before, that His forgiveness is *conveyed* to us,

nor does it follow that we ourselves have any knowledge of our pardon. We may still be mourning, and lamenting, and in the depths of despair, whilst at the same time in God's sight we are justified. David was all this, when Nathan in God's name assured him of pardon. Our distress of mind, therefore, our remorse, is no proof that we are still unforgiven. God forgives when we cannot forgive ourselves. And He assures us of forgiveness by the outward and visible ordinances of His own appointment even when we are trembling, and fearing, and almost despairing of forgiveness. I must once more have recourse to an illustration, and I choose this particular one because it not only helps us to understand that difference between pardon and the assurance of pardon, which cannot be too strongly insisted on, but because it also throws some little light on the much misunderstood doctrine of sacramental grace. I have read somewhere that an admirable layman, visiting, I believe, in one of the crowded, squalid courts of London, came upon a young girl who had strayed from the paths of virtue. He soon found out her history, for she was

deeply ashamed and utterly miserable. She had left her country home some months before, and had ever since been sinking lower and lower, and becoming more and more wretched, and now she was on the verge of desperation. She spoke to him of her home and her friends, of her father and her pure sisters, and of the dark disgrace she had brought upon them all. She took it for granted, when he questioned her and urged her return, that they must all hate and despise her, and that they could never tolerate her unclean presence amongst them ; she was persuaded that her father's door—and his heart—was closed against her for ever. To the visitor this seemed by no means so certain, and he asked if she had ever written to her friends. “No,” she said, “she could never summon up the courage to do that.” “Then I will write to them,” he said, and write he did. The answer came by return of post, an answer full of yearning love and tenderness. Then she learned that ever since she had left them her friends had been trying to discover her whereabouts in the hope of inducing her to return. They assured her of their full forgiveness ; they

told her that ever since she had gone from them they had only had one feeling for her—that of unbounded pity and compassion. All the time she had been picturing them as angry, and censorious, and unforgiving, they had been praying for her, and praying that she might find out her error and come back to them. For all those months there had been no difficulty whatever on their part; for all those months they had already forgiven her in their hearts. But she knew nothing of this: how could she? she could hardly believe it to be possible: not until the letter came, breathing its message of affection, could she credit it. It was the letter *assured* her of a loving pardon; it was the letter *conveyed* it. With those lines of love before her she could doubt no more.

And is not this a parable, a picture, of God's forgiving grace? We, too, have left our Father's house and wandered into a far country, and there we have fed our swine. And we think God is against us: we picture Him as full of righteous anger, when all the time He is wanting to forgive; He is waiting for our repentance that He may forgive. Nothing stands between Him and

us but our reluctance to return. At last we send a message, a penitent cry, a prayer for mercy, to the heavenly throne. Straightway a message assuring us of pardon is sent in return—such a message is the word of Absolution—or a token and pledge of pardon is forwarded to us—such a token is the Sacrament of the Holy Supper. Each is in turn “a means whereby we receive” God’s pardoning grace, and “a pledge to assure us thereof.” Nor is there, or can there be, anything unspiritual or superstitious in regarding them as such. Each of them is to us just what that letter of which I told you a moment ago was to the miserable girl; it is that, if it is more. The *letter* did not forgive: a mere letter, paper and ink, cannot do anything of the kind: it was a living, throbbing heart that forgave, the father’s heart, the sisters’ love. The letter, again, could not bring comfort or assurance to the impenitent: it was only her penitence made them willing to receive her: had she persisted in her evil course, they would not, they could not, have offered to shelter her. But it did assure her, being penitent, of a free pardon. True, it was but paper, but it served its purpose. Nor was

the recipient in any danger of misunderstanding it or over-estimating it. Had anyone said to her (what some good people say to us, who hold the Sacraments of Christ so dear), had anyone said, when they marked the joy and peace which that letter brought, "You really must not attach so much importance to a mere letter. It is only a form. What can a piece of paper do for your welfare?" I think she would have regarded them with profound astonishment; I think she would have replied, "This paper may be nothing but rags and pulp, and the ink nothing but chemicals, but all the same, these rags and these chemicals tell me that I am forgiven. But for them I should not know it. Blessed paper," she would cry, "blessed handwriting, which have brought unspeakable comfort to my mind!" Well, it is thus that *we* regard the message of Absolution and the Blessed Sacraments. We know that neither water, nor bread, nor wine can, of themselves, any more than the blood of bulls and goats, take away sins; but we see that they can serve as signs, tokens, attestations, that our sins are forgiven—as *means* whereby we receive for-

givenness, and as *pledges* to assure us thereof.¹

But you are, perhaps, thinking with yourself that whatever I may have said as to the Sacrament of Baptism, I have so far offered no proof that the Sacrament of the Eucharist is either a means of assuring us of pardon, or an instrument and channel for its conveyance. Very good: then I will now give you such proof. First let me recall to your minds the words of my text, "This is My blood of the [new] covenant, which is shed for many *for the remission of sins.*" I will ask you to observe that it was of the cup of wine which He then held in His hands that our Lord spake this. He did not say, "My blood will soon be shed for the remission of sins," but "Drink ye all of *this*, for *this* is My blood shed . . . unto the forgiveness of sins." It was the Passover wine, or the Communion cup, the emblem of the blood about to be shed on the Cross, that He connected with

¹ If further illustration is needed, it may be found in S. John ix. The spittle, the clay, the water of Siloam were equally unavailing to cure a man born blind. The man was healed by Christ's Divine power, supernaturally. But these natural means were employed to strengthen his faith and test his obedience. They were *means* and no more, but had he scorned them, he would not have been made whole.

forgiveness. And that this was His meaning will be clear if we turn to the Old Testament passage to which these words refer, and on which they are based—I mean Exodus xxiv. 8. There we read, “Moses took the blood”—the blood of “the peace-offerings of oxen,” mentioned in v. 5, which had been put into basins, and half of which he had sprinkled on the altar—he took the rest of the blood, “and sprinkled it on the people, and said, ‘Behold *the blood of the covenant* which the Lord hath made with you.’” “The blood of the covenant,” of which Moses spoke, was that of the second basin, used for sprinkling the people, after the “book of the covenant” had been read in their ears. Similarly, “the blood of the *new* covenant,” of which our Lord speaks, was the blood of the vine—“His blood” it became, and such He calls it—then and there in the cup. And it is of *this* He says that it is “unto the remission of sins.” That is to say, to those who receive it aright, the wine of the Eucharist (the Feast of Christ’s own appointment), conveys God’s full and free forgiveness; it assures them that they are then and there forgiven.

And it does this just because it is "the blood of the *Covenant*." For what are the terms of the covenant which God has made with man, the covenant which is sealed and ratified with blood? Are they not these—on His part *pardon*, grace, and glory: on our part repentance, faith, and obedience? That covenant was made with us at our Baptism: it is renewed in every Holy Communion. Even so, the covenant *pardon*, signed and sealed in Baptism, is sealed to us afresh in the Holy Eucharist. It was sometimes doubted, in early days, whether there was any remedy, any provision for the pardon of sins committed after Baptism. But the Sacrament of the altar is as efficacious as the Sacrament of the laver: each is "unto remission of sins."

But you say, perhaps, that this does not convince you? Then let us turn to words elsewhere employed of this Sacrament of Peace and Love. "The Cup which we bless," says S. Paul, "is it not the Communion (or *participation in*, as the Margin of our Revised Version has it) of the blood of Christ: the bread which we break, is it not the communion of the body of Christ?" The worthy communicant, that is to say, eats

the flesh of Christ and drinks His blood : he dwells in Christ and Christ in him : he is one with Christ and Christ with him. But how can I participate in Christ's body and blood without partaking of the benefits which His precious body and blood procured—one of which assuredly is the forgiveness of sins? How can I be "one with Christ" without partaking of His righteousness? how can I possibly "dwell in Christ and Christ in me" without thereby receiving "remission of my sins, and all other benefits of His passion"?

And we come to much the same conclusion from merely considering the very nature and design of this Holy Sacrament. For it is, among other things, a pleading of the death of Christ. We show His death until His coming again, and it is our plea for pardon and grace. We plead His merits, His obedience, His suffering of death, His "full, perfect, and sufficient sacrifice, oblation, and satisfaction for the sins of the whole world." Can it be that that plea is unavailing? It cannot be. Even the Jewish sacrifices, which foreshadowed that of our Lord, brought forgiveness. When the

priest sprinkled the blood seven times before the Lord, or put it on the horns of the altar, or poured it at the foot of the altar, we are told that he “made an atonement,” and that sin was “forgiven.”¹ It can never be that our “Christian sacrifice”—the sacrament which is a *memorial* of Christ’s death, just as the Jewish sacrifice was a prefiguring of it—is less efficacious than the sacrifices offered under the law. No reason can be assigned why the one should convey forgiveness and not the other; every consideration points the other way. But this sacrament is more than a memorial: it is a peace-offering: we *feast* upon the sacrifice; we not only *show* the tokens of the precious death, but we *partake* of them; it is therefore, as we have just seen, the sacrament of union with our Lord: the sinner is made one with the Saviour. But why? That he may be left “tied and bound with the chain of his sins”? No, but that he may receive “forgiveness of all his sins.”

I invite you, then, dearly beloved, you who are truly sorry for your sins, and have no hope but in God’s mercy, I invite you to the altar of

¹ Lev. iv. 20; Num. xv. 26.

Christ : I bid you to the Easter feast of grace and blessing. Not only to remind you of your dying and interceding Lord : not only that you may commemorate the love beyond all love, and the sorrow beyond all sorrow, but that you may receive from His pierced hands the warrant and the instrument of forgiveness. God forgives you *now*, for the sake of His dear Son, if you are truly penitent, but He *seals* His forgiveness on the soul in the sacraments instituted by His Son. The sacrament of death, and of life from the dead, is a means whereby we receive His pardoning and strengthening grace, and a pledge to assure us thereof.





SERMON VII.

The Sin which hath never Forgiveness.

S. MARK III. 29, 30 (*Revised Version*).

“Whosoever shall blaspheme against the Holy Spirit hath never forgiveness, but is guilty of an eternal sin: because they said, He hath an unclean spirit.”

IS there Forgiveness in a future state? What is the sin which hath never forgiveness? Why is the door of mercy closed against *it*, or, rather, against the man who commits it? These are the three questions to which this sermon will be devoted. Nor can anyone say that they are not deserving of our earnest and patient consideration.

I. And first, as to any Forgiveness “in the world that is to come”—it is true that this question is not directly raised in the text, but

it is raised in the parallel passage in S. Matthew's Gospel—the 12th chapter and the 32nd verse. There we read, "Whosoever shall speak against the Holy Spirit, it shall not be forgiven him, *neither in this world*"—or "age" as the margin has it—"nor in that which is to come." From which it has been concluded by some divines, and the great name of S. Augustine is among them, that for other sins than this there is forgiveness in a future life. It is argued that our Blessed Lord would hardly have said of one sin that it had never forgiveness, either here or hereafter, unless for some sins there was forgiveness hereafter, as well as here.

Now the first thing to be observed is that this passage does not stand alone. There are two or three other texts which bear on it. The first is S. Matt. v. 26, "Verily, I say unto thee, thou shalt by no means come out thence"—out of the prison—"until thou have paid the last farthing," on which the conclusion has been based that when the last farthing has been paid—it is assumed that it can be paid—souls will be reconciled and released. Another is the statement of our Lord in the parable of the

Lost Sheep,¹ where He tells us that the Shepherd “goes after that which is lost *until he finds it.*” The third is the well-known passage in S. Peter’s first Epistle, the 3rd chapter, the 19th verse, about our Lord’s preaching, probably between His death and His resurrection, “to the spirits in prison”—with which we may compare the 6th verse of the 4th chapter: “To this end was the Gospel preached even to the dead, that they might be judged according to men in the flesh, but live according to God in the spirit.”

Now it is obvious that to discuss these passages at all adequately would take a very long time, and I have no idea of attempting it. I only want to say, once for all, that no valid argument for a forgiveness of sins hereafter, either in the intermediate state, or after the Day of Judgment, can be based on any one of them, or upon all of them put together. I repeat that this evidence, such as it is, cannot be relied on, it is altogether insufficient, to prove that some sins *are* pardoned in the next world. For of course it does not follow—to

¹ S. Luke xv. 4.

take S. Matthew first—that because one sin is *not* forgiven either here or there, that other sins are forgiven here *and* there. Our Lord *did* say that for that sin there was no forgiveness hereafter: He did not say that for any other sin there was forgiveness, and if we conclude that there is, we go altogether beyond what His words warrant. So with the other passage in this Evangelist. Because Christ tells us that there is no release from the prison-house until the last farthing is paid, it does not follow that that last farthing ever *can* or *will* be paid. On the contrary, we have some reason for thinking that such payment is impossible. We have a statement very similar to this in the parable of the Unforgiving Servant, the one who owed ten thousand talents. His lord, we are told, delivered him unto the tormentors, *till he should pay all that was due*.¹ But there was not a shadow of hope that he would ever be able to pay his debt; not only was it a prodigious sum of money, but a man in the hands of torturers has no opportunity of raising such an amount. Nor does the parable of the Lost Sheep afford

¹ S. Matt. xviii. 34.

us any firmer foundation. Not to insist on the uncertainty which must attach to all parabolic speech, it must be remembered that the shepherd does not always find his wandering sheep—some stray away beyond recovery; some he finds mangled and dead. And as to our Lord's preaching to the imprisoned spirits, it is to be observed that His preaching the Gospel to them, or to the dead, is limited to a certain class, or to men of a certain age in the world's history—those who “were disobedient in the days of Noah, while the ark was a preparing.” It is not said, I admit, that He preached to no other, but it is not affirmed that He did preach, or does preach now, to any other. We may perhaps build some conjectures, some *hopes* upon these words, but we cannot rest any valid arguments for forgiveness hereafter upon them. There is, consequently, no Scripture which justifies, or even expressly encourages the belief that, if we are not forgiven *now*, we may still hope, through God's mercy, for forgiveness in the disembodied state. It is quite true that God cannot change; that He will then be as loving and compassionate as He is now; in

other words, that His lovingkindness and tender mercy do not cease with our death. We may be sure that if anything can be done for the souls of those who have died impenitent, it will be done—everything which the Divine goodness can devise. But we know too little of that future state, and of our conditions in it, to say positively that we can be brought to penitence there, nor have we any good reason for supposing that the remedies for man's sin and wilfulness which were unavailing here, will prove availing hereafter. It *may be* that the love of God and the Spirit of God will move us there as they did not here; it *may be* that eyes that were blinded here will be opened there, and that hearts that were rebellious here will be conquered, conquered by the Divine compassion, there; but we cannot build on *maybe's*, least of all when our eternal happiness is concerned. I can therefore preach no gospel of forgiveness hereafter. But what of that? What does it matter, to *you* at least, when there is such free and generous and abounding forgiveness *here*? Why should you wait on the bare chance that your sins may be forgiven you later on? It is

certain that sins are forgiven now ; certain that every penitent soul has “ perfect remission and forgiveness ” ; it is quite uncertain that, if we scorn the present pardon, which is so freely offered us, it will be offered us again in a future state of being, or that if it were offered we should have the will and the power to accept it.

2. I now turn to my second question—“ What is this sin which hath never forgiveness ? ” It is well that we should know, if we can. I have met with several persons who were plunged into despair by the belief that they had committed it, when it seemed to me they were entirely guiltless of it, just because they were so anxious about it. On the other hand, if there is a possibility, even a remote possibility, of our committing it, it is necessary that we should know what it is, in order that we may be on our guard against it.

Now there is no doubt as to what the particular sin or temper which our Lord denounced as “ blasphemy against the Holy Ghost ” was. Both S. Matthew and S. Mark are explicit on that point. It was the sin of those Pharisees and scribes, who had followed our Lord from

Jerusalem, ever trying to thwart His work, and who said that He “had an unclean spirit,” and cast out devils by the aid of “Beelzebub, the prince of the devils.” The sin which He had then immediately in His view, and for which He said there was no forgiveness, was the wicked, dogged, and outrageous perversity of ascribing His gentle and beneficent miracles to the powers of darkness—as if Satan would cast out Satan, and so help to overthrow his own dominion. It is true that our Lord does not say, in so many words, that the Pharisees *had* committed this sin, but I think the narrative conveys the impression that they had. And because it was of their attitude, their stubborn hostility to His miracles that He spoke, it has been somewhat hastily concluded that no such sin is possible at the present day. It is true that the sin in its original shape is hardly possible; I do not know that anyone would now dream of saying that our Saviour’s wondrous works were helped by the devil. But I am not so sure that this sin, in its essence, can not be repeated now. I have little doubt that it can—otherwise I question whether this warning would

have been recorded as it is. And I believe that the essence of the sin lies in this—in the “wilful determined opposition to” or denunciation of “the present power of the Holy Ghost,”¹ as it is seen working in the world. It is not so much a particular *act* of sin that is contemplated—the “speaking a word” against the Holy Ghost, or “blaspheming” the Spirit, is only mentioned as the product and evidence of a temper of mind, an attitude, a character antagonistic to the Spirit of God, and which may take the shape of blasphemy or some other form. I believe that wherever men knowingly and wilfully call evil good and good evil; wherever they put darkness for light and light for darkness; wherever they resolutely shut their eyes to the light, knowing it to be the light; wherever they are deaf, and are *determined* to be deaf, to the solemn calls of conscience, which is the organ of the Holy Ghost, there they come perilously near, if indeed they do not commit the sin which hath never forgiveness.

3. And why, let us now proceed to ask, why is it that this sin, or this sinful habit of mind,

¹ Alford on S. Matt. xii. 32.

is beyond the pale of forgiveness? Why is it that among all the children of men, whatsoever their sins and blasphemies may be, there is not one to whom forgiveness is denied—so great are the compassions of our God—not one, save the man who blasphemes against the Spirit? Why is it that the tender mercy, the grace which “bringeth salvation to all men,”¹ brings no salvation, no remission to him? I believe the answer to be suggested by these words: He “is guilty of an eternal sin.” He is not forgiven, he cannot be—not because the patience of the Almighty is exhausted; not because His unspeakable pity is at last worn out; not because there is not forgiveness for this man if he would seek it, but because he has quenched the Light that was in him, the only light that could lead him to the footstool of mercy; because he has spurned and rejected the Power, the only power that could lead him to penitence. He is not forgiven, he cannot be, not because God is unwilling to pardon, but because he is unable to repent. The love of God, I take it, knows no change; the will of

¹ Titus ii. 11.

God for our salvation¹ knows no change; the yearning pity of the Father over this lost child, of the Shepherd over this wandering sheep, is as warm and tender as ever, but the child has *cut himself* off from compassion; the sheep has strayed whither the Shepherd cannot or may not follow it. He is "guilty of an eternal sin," because he has rejected the grace and help which alone can preserve from sin; he "hath never forgiveness" because he hath never repentance. You will remember what I have said more than once, that the knowledge of sin, or the *realization* of it, and the feeling of compunction for sin are wrought in the heart of man by the Divine Spirit, and can only be effected by His blessed operation. But if so, it is easy to see why the sin in question admits of no forgiveness. The man has *quarrelled with the Holy Ghost*; has refused to listen to His voice; has bidden Him to depart out of his coasts. And the Spirit of God has taken him at his word, just as our Lord took the Gadarenes at their word. The Spirit strives with him no longer; he is left to himself, and so the penitence which is the one

¹ 1 Tim. ii. 4.

condition of pardon becomes an impossibility. So far from confessing his sins he goes on committing them ; he has put from him the powers of the world to come, he cannot be renewed again unto repentance.

And this consideration suggests a sure test whether we have blasphemed against the Holy Ghost or not. If we have, we shall have no anxiety on the subject, no concern about our souls. So long as there is any the faintest feeling of penitence, or even any real desire to be right with God, we have not quarrelled with the Holy Spirit ; we have not sinned away our day of grace, for that penitence or that desire is the Spirit's work. Is there one here burdened and tortured by the thought that he has blasphemed against the Holy Ghost ? He may be quite comfortable on that score ; if he had done so, he would feel no burden and experience no remorse.

And now, my friends, I have said what I had to say about Sin and its Forgiveness. Have I said enough—enough to move you, under the teaching of God's good Spirit, to penitence, and so to the enjoyment of a present pardon ?

I cannot tell ; I can only leave my instructions and appeals in God's hands. It is His part, not mine, to give the increase. All that I dare to hope is that I have sowed some seeds of Divine truth in your hearts. I hope you have at least learned, if you did not know it before, that you are miserable sinners ; that God for Christ's sake freely forgives all penitent sinners, and that He *conveys* His forgiveness, ordinarily, through the message of Absolution and the Sacraments of His love.

THE END.







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